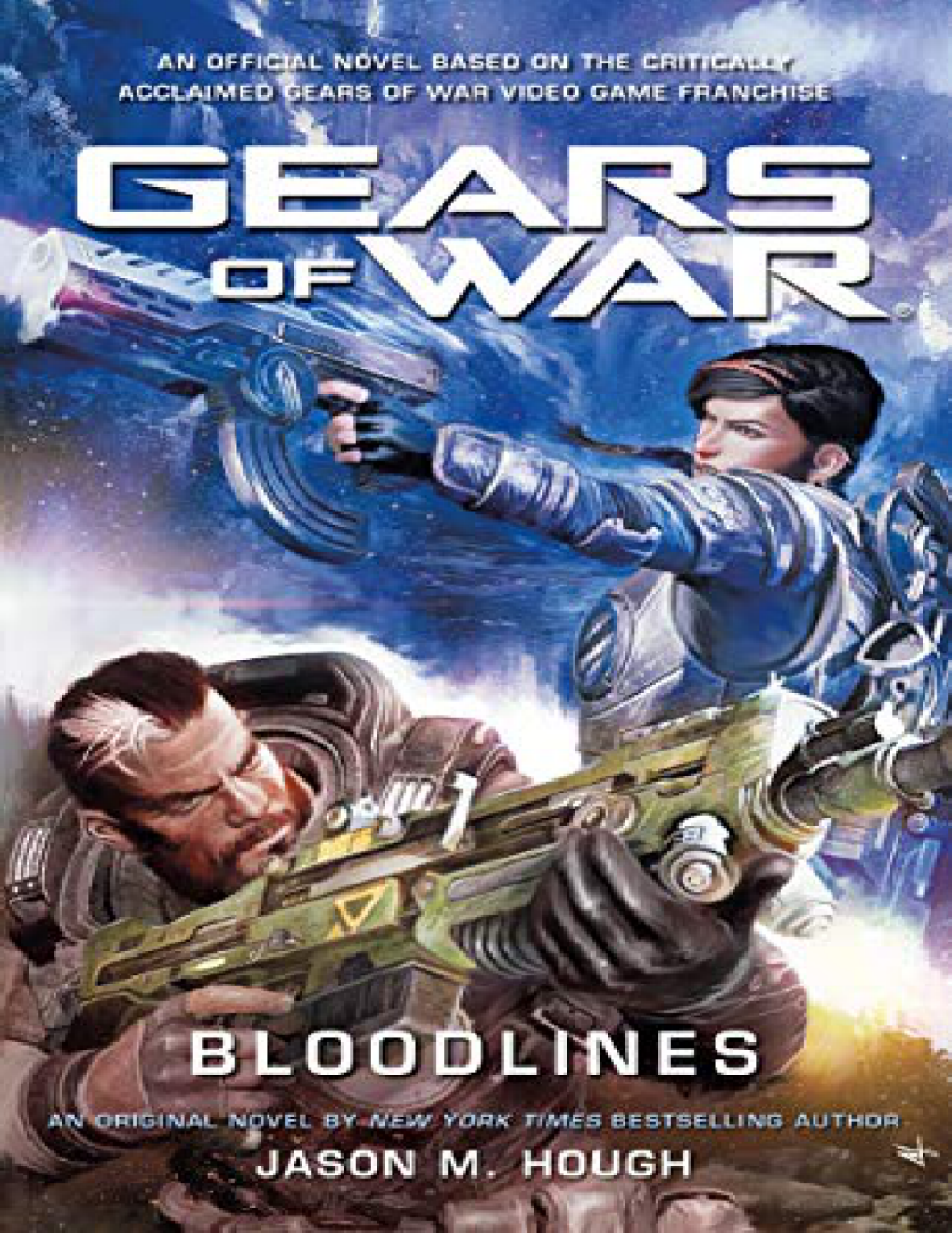
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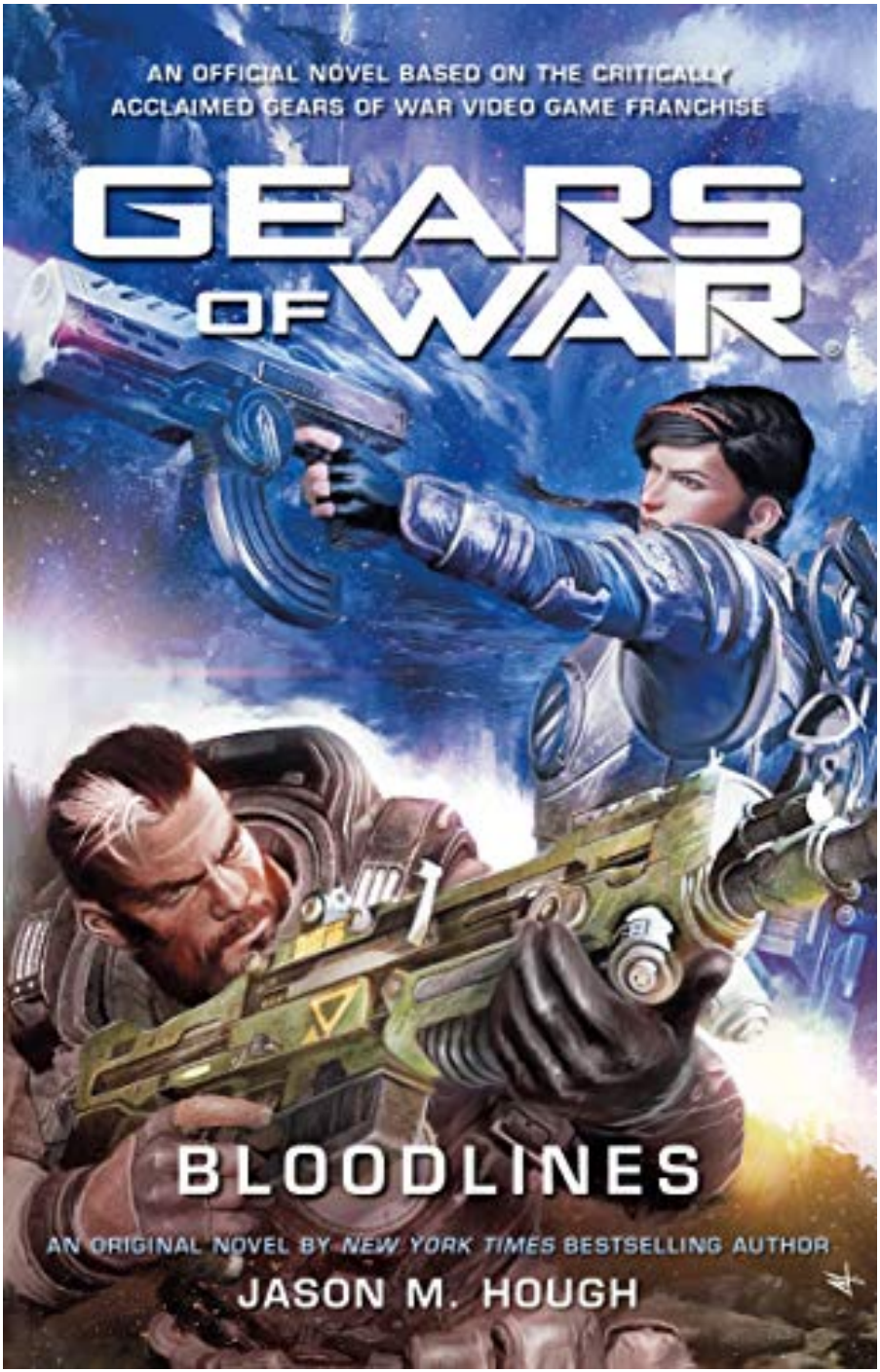
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GEARS OF WAR

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For Betty, and for Dez.

ACT 1

SETTLEMENT 2—JACINTO PLATEAU

1: ROADBLOCK

There was a hole in the clouds, where a beam of white-hot death punched through and tore the world to shreds.

For a time—how long, exactly, Kait couldn't say—all she could see was that brilliant glowing spear emblazoned on the inside of her eyelid. A vertical brilliance that almost blotted out all else. Almost.

For at its base there was a silhouette. A shadow against that radiance, a darkness to provide some counterbalance.

A shadow that had been her friend.

A shadow that had been—

"*JD!*"

Del, shouting, running. Toward the carnage and fire. She heard his panicked cry only a second before he shouldered past her and rushed into the inferno. Kait followed instinctively, her brain still numbed by what she'd seen. What she'd learned.

Settlement 2 was a smoking ruin. Flames engulfed all the buildings around her. Even the fucking pavement was on fire, superheated to a magma-like state by the raw, astonishing power of the Hammer of Dawn.

"*Marcus?*" Kait shouted into the smoke and chaos. "*Cole?*" Neither man responded. They could be anywhere. They could have been vaporized.

Another beam lanced down from the sky, off to her right. Indiscriminate. Out of control.

"Baird," Del barked into his comm. "Shut the damn thing off!"

"I can't!"

"Figure out a way!"

Damon Baird replied, but his words were lost in an explosion some hundred yards away. Another building that popped like a balloon in the superheated air. Glass and rock rained down all around her. Had Marcus

gone that way? Had he been in there?

She may have lost track of Marcus, but she knew where his son was. Or had been. That had to be her priority now.

JD had been next to a Minotaur truck, about ten yards away, and it was completely engulfed in flames. Kait caught up to Del and gripped his shoulder, pulling him back from the intense heat. Even at this distance she felt the skin on her cheeks beginning to sear.

In the flames she could just see the shape of Lizzie Carmine. What was left of her. Kait gritted her teeth and looked away, closed her eyes. The image refused to fade. She caught the smell of burning flesh, and it made her stomach heave.

"There," Del said, and he was off again, but sideways now. He ran ten steps and crouched beside a pile of debris. Kait blinked. It wasn't debris. It was a person. It was him. JD Fenix. Lifeless, sprawled out. Ribbons of smoke curling up from his arm and chest. Face blackened. Eyes closed. Blood trailing from the corner of his mouth. Del had two fingers pressed against his neck.

He was crying, Kait realized.

"Is he alive?" she asked.

"I… I can't tell. I can't tell! Am I feeling his pulse, or my own?" He croaked out the words. Even from here she could see him trembling.

Gunfire erupted behind her. Fahz, shouting insults at an unseen enemy, trying to hold them off with a Tri-Shot rotary cannon he must have picked up from a fallen DR-1. Judging from his tone she knew it was a lost cause.

"We need to get out of here," Kait said, aware of how distant and numb her voice sounded. Del didn't respond. His world had shrunk down to one thing: his best friend. She glanced around. Only one Minotaur remained operational, so far spared the wrath of the Hammer of Dawn, but penned in by its two destroyed counterparts.

Kait hunkered down beside her friend. Her eyes met Del's as he continued to feel JD's neck for a pulse. The look lasted only a second, but she could see in his expression an echo of her own warring thoughts. Unfathomable sadness, and a profound disappointment in what JD had done all those months ago, right here in Settlement 2. A truth she had learned only minutes before. JD had fired first. Started that slaughter.

He had never told Del, or her. Hid it from them.

The roar of Fahz's Tri-Shot grew closer. He was backing toward their position, firing at something obscured by smoke. Swarm, of course. Something nasty. Something that would kill them all—if the Hammer of Dawn didn't do the job first. After seeing Lizzie, and now JD, Kait wasn't sure which end she preferred.

Just a few feet away a figure emerged from the smoke. Kait barely had time to draw her pistol before she recognized Marcus Fenix.

"He alive?" he said. The bayonet on his Lancer dripped with the guts of

a fallen enemy.

"I'm not sure," Del admitted, sounding on the verge of panic. Whatever feelings that answer might have stirred, Marcus kept them bottled up.

"Get him into the truck, before Baird fries it, too." He hiked a thumb toward the remaining Minotaur. Just beyond it, Kait saw the group of civilians JD had managed to get out of Carmine's truck before it exploded. They were huddled under the awning of what had been a restaurant. Unable to retreat any farther as flames raged within.

Then she saw a familiar figure. Cole was with them, protecting them and keeping them calm all at once.

"Help me get him up, Kait," Del said as he shifted JD into a sitting position. Slinging his weapon, he pulled one of the injured man's arms over his shoulder. Kait moved to JD's other side. She grabbed JD's wrist and was about to lift it over her own shoulder when she paused.

"C'mon, hurry!" Del said, grunting.

Marcus jogged off toward the functioning truck.

"Cole, Fahz!" he shouted. "Get everyone in the truck! We're leaving!"

"Del," Kait said. "Look."

Del followed her gaze, and a look of horror crossed his features before he battled it back. JD's right arm was a ruin of burned tissue and shrapnel wounds. If he was alive, moving him might be the thing that pushed him beyond that threshold. Looking at the arm, she wondered if he might prefer not to survive.

Marcus bellowed for them to hurry up.

"His arm—" Kait called back.

"—isn't going to matter if we all die out here! Pick him up!" Then he was in the cab of the truck, pulling a dead driver from the seat and climbing in behind the wheel. He gunned the engine.

She met Del's eyes. He grimaced, then nodded.

When she lifted James Fenix's mangled arm, he screamed.

* * *

A mile out of Settlement 2 the Hammer of Dawn finally faltered. Its beam transformed to short, erratic bursts, somehow more terrifying than the long, sustained blasts, as each split-second assault was so random, yet still incredibly destructive.

Finally it flickered one last time, and fell silent. The sky went dark again, save for the dim glow of the burning settlement that was now mostly hidden under a blanket of thick smoke.

JD lay on the floor between the two benches, covered in all the burn-pads they had been able to salvage. There were benches on either side of him, crowded with civilians. Most stared numbly ahead, or cowered against one another with their eyes shut. Anything but look at the wounded man

who lay between them, or at the ruins of their homes rapidly receding into the hellish distance.

Unable herself to look at the groaning, burned form of her friend any longer, Kait moved to the back of the vehicle. Marcus sat at the end of one bench, arms folded over his chest. He stared blankly at the floor in front of him, lost in thought.

Taking the seat opposite him, Kait pulled its canvas cover aside and aimed her Lancer out the narrow opening, even though there wasn't anything to shoot at, now. The Hammer of Dawn had seen to that.

"Anyone else feel like we just got a preview of what all of Sera's gonna look like if we don't end this soon?" Fahz asked over the comm. He was in the driver's seat up front, with Del. No one replied. There was no need.

Kait finally gave up and pulled the canvas closed. She forced herself to check on JD. Despite the horrible injuries, his face looked calm. Peaceful even. They had given him as many painkillers as they dared. In the dim light, and covered in the medical blanket, he reminded Kait of her own father at the end of his life. The memory was one she'd long repressed. To think of it now made her shudder.

As if her nightmares weren't bad enough.

"I said—" Fahz started.

"Enough, Fahz." It was Del. "Just focus on the road, okay?"

"They didn't follow us, mate. There aren't any left after… *that*."

"Maybe not behind us," Del said. "It's the road ahead I'm worried about. In fact, give me that Tri-Shot. I'll take it up on the roof."

"Stay put," Kait said. "I'll do it, just give me a second to climb up." There was a tear in the thick canvas covering the flatbed, right behind the cab. Beneath the gash was a weapons locker, completely empty. Kait stood atop the box and pushed herself up through the opening. From there it was an easy climb over to the roof of the cab.

She rapped on the hatch with her fist.

"Hand me that Tri-Shot, Fahz."

"Gladly," he replied, opening the armored portal and pushing the weapon up through to her. Kait grunted with effort as she pulled the bulky weapon onto the roof. Then she slipped her legs inside and planted her feet on the back of the bench seat between Fahz's and Del's shoulders.

No one spoke for several minutes as the truck rumbled forward. It was Del who broke the silence.

"Swarm!" he shouted, suddenly. "Dead ahead!"

Kait had been looking off to the left. She snapped her gaze forward at Del's warning and scanned the road, hoping against hope he was mistaken.

But no, he had it right. A Scion loomed at the side of the road, standing behind an old traffic barrier that came up to its waist. Beyond, in the darkness, several Drones rushed up to join it. How many more were out there, hidden by cover or shadow, was anyone's guess.

More Swarm, Kait thought. *There'll always be more.*

A sudden wave of fatigue washed over her. Maybe it was the memory of her father in his final days battling rustlung, the disease that had taken him where even the Locust War had not. For an instant she found herself thinking of him again.

The war he'd fought—

"Kait!"

She snapped out of her reverie.

"Look, I can handle this if you're not up for it," Del said, and he started to climb up.

"No, I've got it." She gestured for him to sit back down.

The truck was old, and at some point someone had scrawled "Old Gal" on the roof. Kait patted the words with one hand, then rested the Tri-Shot beside them and took aim at the road ahead.

"Focus on the Scion," Del said. "We don't have to take them all on. We just need to get past them."

Kait positioned herself as best she could. The Tri-Shot, meant to be used by the robotic DeeBees, had no sighting of any kind—but then it wasn't exactly a weapon that required accuracy. She grabbed both grips and, as the enemy drew near, pulled on the big trigger that activated the rotary barrels.

The whole truck seemed to pulsate with the vibration of the cannon. Its three barrels spun more slowly than a typical chain gun, but this deficiency was more than made up for by the high caliber rounds it fired. Muzzle flashes strobed the landscape before her. Tracer rounds flew every so often, but they might as well have been left out. She could see where the shots landed by the carnage they created.

Kait coaxed the weapon toward the Scion. The drumbeat regularity of its firing suddenly stretched out as the barrels began to overheat, slowing the rate of fire. Shell casings pooled on the roof around her. Some rained down on Fahz, who howled as one burned his ear before bouncing away. He seemed about to complain, but perhaps the thought of JD's condition made him hold his tongue for once. Kait ignored him anyway and kept firing.

She had a bead on the creature, but it had taken cover behind one of the old traffic barriers. As she watched it started to push the object into the road to block their path.

Fahz saw it, too. He accelerated. "Hold on to something," he growled, swerving around a crater in the old, disused highway. It was all Kait could do to keep the Tri-Shot from sliding off the roof, much less pointed at her foe. Still, she fired, overheated weapon or not. The Scion started to stand, then thought better of it. Dust and debris flew into the air as the road barrier he crouched behind began to chip away under the onslaught. If Fahz would just stop, Kait thought, she could bore a hole through the concrete and then through her target.

That wasn't the plan, though, so she kept the Scion pinned down.

Then her bullets ran out.

"Fahz!" she called. "Ammo!"

"Bit busy driving, here, in case you hadn't noticed?" he shouted back, swerving again, back to the right.

Del had been readying to shoot through the gun slot on his door, but abandoned the effort now. He shoved his Lancer into the narrow space between his seat and the door, then fumbled around on the floor of the cab for the box of ammo. Grasping it, he lifted it toward her.

"Just pull the chain out and feed it up here!"

He did so.

Kait took the belt of bullets and fed it into the weapon, slapped the rack closed and grabbed the handles again. The barrels began to spin.

They were only fifty yards away now. Several Drones had reached the edge of the road, but Kait ignored them. The Scion had blocked the right lane completely now with the waist-high wall of concrete. He was at one end of it, at the center of the road, peering over the top of his cover and watching them approach. Waiting.

Fahz saw it, too, and maneuvered the Minotaur into the left lane. Which was, Kait realized, exactly what the enemy hoped.

"He's gonna try to jump on," she said. "Be ready on the gun slot, Del!" She had no idea if he heard her, but there was movement in the cab below.

Kait poured rounds into the barricade. The Tri-Shot, having cooled during the reload, thudded in her hands with its usual drumbeat pace. Dust filled the air. Sparks flew as rounds ricocheted off the slab of stone and the road all around it. Chunks of shrapnel flew and bounced away, smoking, and in all that, barely visible, she saw the Scion's hand. It flashed out from behind the barrier, flinging a metallic object into their path.

"Grenade!"

Fahz heaved on the steering wheel. The truck lurched to the left, onto the rugged shoulder. Before they could leave the road entirely Fahz corrected. A hard turn to the right, tilting sickeningly onto three wheels. Somehow he kept the truck from rolling over, but he couldn't avoid the explosion. The grenade exploded as they passed over it, sending a shockwave against the exposed undercarriage of the Minotaur.

It was, Kait had to admit, a brilliant piece of driving. Fahz, unable to avoid the grenade, had let the underside of the truck absorb the damage, while simultaneously going around the barricade blocking the left lane.

Fahz straightened them out. The tires shrieked beneath them as they reconnected with the road. In that same instant, something heavy slammed into Del's door.

With them all distracted by the grenade, the Scion had leapt.

Its hand flew in through the open gun slot, grasping at Del's neck. Its muscled forearm bulged as the creature squeezed, shoving Del back into his seat. Kait tried to kick at the wrist, to no avail.

The Scion started to laugh.

Del, his face contorted as the Scion choked him, fumbled between his seat and the door for something.

Kait heard the revving of the Lancer's chainsaw an instant later, and then Del jerked the weapon upward with sudden ferocity. There was a sickening wet noise. Blood sprayed the wall of the cab, then the arm was free and the Scion, outside, was howling.

Del wasted no time. He pulled the door lever and elbowed it open, hard, sending the creature falling off into the road. Kait could hear the thud as the Scion hit the ground and rolled.

Fahz accelerated. As they drove away, Marcus opened fire from the canvas flaps in back.

Turning herself, Kait brought the Tri-Shot around too, aiming backward. The Scion may be down, but there were still those Drones to worry about.

But by the time she had eyes on the enemy again, they were thirty yards behind and fading fast. Their Scion leader lay in the road, unmoving.

Kait scanned the hills to either side. All seemed quiet.

"I think we're out of the woods," she called down.

"You're gonna jinx it, talking like that," Fahz said.

Kait shook her head, ignoring him, climbing down into the cab and jostling the two men aside until she had room to sit between them. It was a tight squeeze with all three of them in the cab, but somehow they made it work. Kait took some small pleasure in how uncomfortable Fahz looked sharing a ride with two people he enjoyed antagonizing at every opportunity.

"JD's not going to last the drive," Del said suddenly. "Especially not if we keep getting blown up."

"Did we get blown up?" Fahz asked, checking his armor, his head, and the steering wheel. "Nope, all here. Thanks to me."

Del leaned to look past Kait, jabbing a finger at Fahz.

"You know what, I'm getting really sick of your shit."

"What a coincidence," Fahz replied. "I'm already sick of yours."

Kait, tired to the point of collapse, ignored their pointless arguing. She activated her comm, speaking in a lowered voice.

"Marcus," she said. "I don't think JD can survive being jostled like that again."

"Already been on the comm to Baird," Marcus replied. "They're sending a bird. Rendezvous isn't far. A mile, tops. Can we make it that far?"

"Depends how many more grenades we run over," Del said.

"Zero, so far!" Fahz replied.

"Just stay sharp," Marcus said, raising his voice. "All of you. We'll make it."

Ten minutes later he pulled off the road into a wide, grassy field, where a King Raven waited, its rotor still spinning.

2: PROGNOSIS

There were parallels, Kait thought, between JD's condition and the city of New Ephyra. Both were trapped between life and death, a state that was reliant entirely on external forces. JD on the medical team that seemed to be waiting, waiting...

While the city waited for the Swarm to come calling.

Sitting on a chair in JD's hospital room, she had her legs tucked up, arms folded across her knees, chin resting on her forearms. She could sit like this for hours, she found, and only occasionally doze. Even then the sleep was shallow and furtive. It was a position her father had taught her when she was… what, seven? She couldn't remember exactly. Those days of exploring the wilderness around Fort Umson were long, long gone.

JD just lay there, inert, as he had for two weeks. A machine hissed and clicked beside him, doing the work his lungs still refused to do. There was a thick tube in his mouth, and smaller ones in his nose. His right arm was completely covered in burn pads, and they'd shaved his head—the part where the hair hadn't been singed off, that is—to better tend to his burns. Sometimes a team of nurses would come in to shift his body into different positions. *"To prevent atrophy,"* the doctor had said. Then they would wash him, feed him.

Everything except wake him up, or let him go.

"Just like this fucking city," she said to herself, staring out the window.

"What was that, Corporal Diaz?"

Kait didn't turn at the sound of Mina Jinn's voice from the doorway. The woman liked to show up suddenly, not making a sound until she was already in the room.

"You know," Kait replied, "I really wish you'd stop calling me that."

"Forgive me." Jinn stepped into the room. "A slip of the tongue. Or,

perhaps, just wishful thinking."

Kait couldn't quite hold in her laugh. The COG First Minister had started this little head game—just one of many the woman engaged in at any given time—only days after Kait had first arrived in New Ephyra.

First the woman had met privately with JD and Del, forgiving their desertion and reinstating their ranks. A meeting, pointedly, that Kait had been left out of. After all, Jinn would have had a hard time convincing Kait to join up if her two best friends were in jail instead of in uniform. No doubt she didn't want Kait there to argue for refusal, either.

Once Jinn had secured their cooperation, though, she'd tried to use them to recruit Kait, confident she'd follow her friends into the waiting arms of the COG.

But then Kait had learned of survivors in her village. Kids, in fact, left behind to fend for themselves against the growing threat of the Swarm. For Kait the decision had been an easy one, though it caught the rest of them off guard. She'd left. Snuck out of the city in the night, with a little help from Damon Baird and Marcus Fenix.

Kait had saved the kids in the end, even reunited with her Uncle Oscar in the process. And in the final skirmish against the Swarm, everyone had helped, even JD and Del. The band was, as it were, back together.

Jinn, it seemed, had taken every opportunity while Kait was off on her lone-wolf mission to "accidentally" call her Corporal Diaz. It was as if she thought saying it would somehow make it happen. Especially when she said it within earshot of others. The declaration of rank had indeed spread. Nurses called her by the title. Doctors, too. Even Baird had said it accidentally, once, not understanding what Jinn was up to. In the First Minister's mind, it was a foregone conclusion that Kait would join the COG, the Coalition of Ordered Governments.

In Kait's mind, that was far from the truth.

Especially now.

"Did you know he fired the first shot?" she asked.

Jinn took one of the chairs by the bed, her eyes on JD.

"I'm sorry?"

"You know what I'm talking about. Settlement 2."

Jinn shifted, uncomfortable. She placed her hands over her pregnant belly. "What happened there was regrettable—"

"That's not what I asked."

"The situation was complicated, Kait."

"Did. You. *Know?*"

The First Minister reached out and brushed JD's cheek with the back of her hand. A motherly gesture if ever there had been one. Kait waited, watching, wondering if Jinn was really moved to have a tender moment with the wounded soldier, or just buying time to compose her answer.

"Of course I knew," Jinn replied, her voice even, steady. "I gave the

order."

Kait hadn't expected that. Her first instinct—one of rage—was quickly replaced by suspicion. She wouldn't put it past Mina Jinn to lie, to say those words, if the woman thought it might mend the rift between JD and Kait. JD and everyone, really. Before she could decide what to say, a doctor entered. Someone probably interrupted his sleep as soon as the hospital registered Jinn's presence.

"First Minister," he said. He looked at Kait, and if he said "Corporal," Kait thought she might leave then and there. "Ms. Diaz."

"Any change?" Jinn asked, eyes never leaving the prone figure.

"I'm afraid not," he replied. "There's still significant brain activity, which continues to give us hope he'll pull through this, but the rest of him remains entirely on life support."

"And your prognosis, Doctor?"

The man measured his words. "There's just no way to know. He could wake up tomorrow, or a year from now, or… never." Before Jinn could press, he added, "In my experience, and from the scope of his injuries, the fact that he hasn't woken up by now means he's not likely to do so."

Jinn said nothing. Her focus was entirely on JD.

Kait realized she'd been holding her breath. She let it out, slowly.

The doctor shifted uneasily. "First Minister, excuse me, but it may be wise to make a decision soon… To invest this amount of time and supplies in one man—"

"You can go now," Jinn snapped.

The doctor nodded and, with a furtive glance at Kait, backed out of the room. Numb and exhausted, Kait kept quiet. A silence seeped into the room like a morning fog, absolute save for the wheeze and click of the life-support machine.

"I envy you sometimes," Jinn said suddenly.

"Why is that?"

The First Minister turned her head slightly, casting a sidelong glance.

"Sorry, I was talking to JD," she said. "The soldier's life. Following orders instead of making decisions. I envy it, sometimes."

Kait glared at her. "He still made a decision. He could have chosen not to pull the trigger."

For a moment Jinn went tense, looking ready to debate the topic, but then her features softened. She turned back to the unconscious man, and stroked his cheek again.

"I suppose you're right," she said after a time. "Besides, taking James off life support is not my decision to make. It should be Marcus who decides. It's his right."

The unspoken accusation left Kait feeling even colder. Marcus had only visited his son once in the last few weeks, and even that had been brief. The worst part was, she understood why that had been. She'd felt the reluctance

herself, and knew Del had, too. Jinn and Fahz had been the most diligent at keeping the vigil.

"At the same time," Jinn went on, "I somehow feel responsible for him. It was my program that helped his mother Anya become pregnant. I was even there when he was born. I—"

That was it. Kait stood and left the room. At the hospital's front entrance she ran into Del, who was coming up the steps.

"Any change?" he asked.

"No."

"He alone up there?"

"Jinn's with him."

"Ugh." Del stared at the building's facade. "Feels like every time I go up it's either Fahz telling JD some war story, or Jinn leaning over him and whispering like she's plying him with all her secrets."

Kait grimaced. "I know what you mean. I just wish he'd wake up, so I can knock him on his ass."

"Yeah, seriously." He looked away from the building. "Maybe I'll come back later, then."

"Wise decision," she replied, and started walking again. Del fell in beside her, and remained with her all the way to Baird's mansion, where she was staying. At the gate she paused, turned to her friend.

"The doctor's pushing to have him unplugged."

Del didn't seem surprised. It was something they'd all contemplated since returning from Settlement 2.

"What'd Jinn say?"

"She told him to get lost."

At that her friend raised an eyebrow.

"Then she said it was Marcus's call," Kait added. "But *then* she started going on about how she's practically JD's mom because of the whole thing with Anya and… I just had to get the fuck out of there. The two of them deserve each other."

"That's kind of harsh." At her withering gaze Del held up his hands. "I mean, I get where you're coming from, but still…" He looked back toward the hospital. "Damn. Going to be interesting to see how Jinn's kid turns out. She'd be an… *interesting* mom to have."

She tried, but failed, to stop another laugh that bubbled out of her. This time, the laughter wouldn't stop, and soon Del was laughing, too. It felt good, but it flooded her with guilt, too. Despite everything, ultimately this was JD they were talking about.

They lingered there on the sidewalk, the mood growing serious again as around them the citizens of New Ephyra went about their day. The place had changed in the last few months, now that the threat of the Swarm had become an undeniable thing, like a massive thunderhead on the horizon.

"Jinn told me she gave JD the order to shoot," Kait said. Del, watching a

patrol of DeeBees march by, grunted.

"And what did you say?"

"I told her he still had a choice."

"That's not how the military works—"

"I know, I know. But… fuck that," she growled. "Seriously. Fuck that."

Leaving him there in the street, she went off in search of Baird's private gym, ready to take a few hundred swings at a punching bag until her body reached the verge of collapse. It was the only way she could get herself to sleep without the nightmares.

Which was probably why the nightmares had started to bleed into her waking hours, too.

3: THE LONG GAME

"Strange place for a meeting," Baird said, entering the gloom of JD's hospital room.

The lights were off, save the status indicators from the machines keeping James Dominic Fenix alive. Mina Jinn sat on the edge of JD's bed, leaning over his prone form like a grieving mother. Her face was lit by the glowing screens on the machine beside him. Red, then white, then red, then white.

The shutters on the wall-length window had been opened, giving a view out onto the nighttime city. Until recently it had been a glittering jewel in the evenings. One of Baird's favorite sights in the world, that skyline. But with the power rationing of late, most of the streetlights had been turned off, and the citizens were thus far complying with the voluntary effort to turn out unneeded lights in the evening, and virtually all lights at night.

All of which meant that, at this late hour, the only lights he could see out there were small pools of twisting, erratic beams, cast by the "eyes" of the robotic DeeBees that patrolled and maintained the curfew.

After a moment or two Jinn finally seemed to notice his arrival. She stood with an effort, one hand going to the small of her back while the other supported her abdomen and the child within. Once standing, she gestured toward two chairs in the corner of the room. Baird took one. Jinn sat by the window, her profile just a shadow against the night sky beyond. The idea of conversing with her without being able to read her facial expressions was disconcerting, but he decided to follow her lead and leave the lights off.

"The doctor says a normal routine can be important," Jinn said, as if reading his thoughts, "hence the dark."

"Works for me," Baird lied. A silence stretched, and guilt welled up inside him. He began to really hate not being able to see her face.

"Look," he said, "I can only apologize so many times. The situation out

there, as reported… it was chaos. They were trapped. We were going to lose some of our best people. Friends of mine. Family, really. Not to mention all the evacuees they'd picked up. It would have been a massacre, one for the history books. So I…

"I made a choice, and I stand by it," he continued. "At the time… it was the only call, Jinn. The only call, and I'd do it again. And… and I'm rambling, aren't I?"

Her silence went on, just long enough to be at the brink of unbearable. He couldn't tell for sure, but he thought she was still looking at JD.

"We're well past apologies," she said finally.

Baird decided it was his turn to be silent. He'd come here expecting a massive fight. Jinn had avoided speaking with him since the event, partly because of what had happened to JD, and partly because he'd unleashed a weapon she'd expressly forbidden him to use. Baird had put her in a tough position, and was prepared to face the consequences, whatever Jinn might eventually decide. Perhaps even a pair of handcuffs and his own robots escorting him to prison, accused of war crimes.

"In fact," Jinn said, "I'm starting to fear we're well past everything."

"Meaning?" Baird asked, though he thought he knew the answer already. He stared hard at her silhouette, trying to glean anything he could from her posture.

"You said you made a choice," she replied. "At Settlement 2. You made a choice to deploy the Hammer of Dawn. JD made a choice in asking for you to do it."

"I don't think he had any other—"

"We're out of choices now, aren't we, Damon."

It wasn't really a question. He nodded, unsure if she could even see that.

"We tried equipping the DeeBees, not just with knowledge, but weapons, too. The Swarm turned them into their own abominations. We tried the Hammer of Dawn, the result of which lies here in front of us."

Baird swallowed, a fresh wave of guilt crashing down on his shoulders.

"We're running low on a lot of supplies," she added, gesturing to the dormant lights, "but there's one commodity I'm most terrified of running out of, and that's choices."

"Unfortunately my factories can't manufacture options." He sensed a shift at that, a split second where she appreciated the gallows humor. "Be a good trick, though. Maybe I should work on it."

"I would appreciate it if you could be serious, Damon."

"Yes, First Minister. Sorry."

"You're forgiven. Just for the joke, I mean. Not for destroying an entire settlement, and nearly killing a man who is like a son to me."

Baird decided to hold his tongue there, too.

Jinn was right, after all.

She let out a breath, one that wavered slightly. There was fear in it, he

thought, and that made him afraid, too. Afraid where Jinn was going with all this.

"Despite what happened out there," she said, "I want you to know I still value your opinion. Which is why I called you here."

"Happy to help."

"You haven't yet heard what I'm going to ask."

"Good point. I retract my happiness."

"Damon…"

"I know, I know. Serious face. It's back on."

She actually did laugh then, but it was the impatient sort of laugh. "As I see it, we have only two choices left to us." She let that sink in for a second before continuing. "We either bring everyone we can here, to the city, or we scatter as far and wide as possible, in hopes the Swarm can't track us all down."

He'd spent a lot of time thinking about the same choices, and discussing them with Sam, Cole, and even Marcus to some extent. Baird leaned forward, organizing his thoughts with more care than he usually liked to use, before turning them into words.

"If we run," he said, "we need places to go. You know more than I do how the rest of Sera is faring in this… outbreak."

"Not well."

"Some of us might survive, yes, but to what end?" he continued. "A few little hidden tribes in a world overrun with monsters? If that's our future, then I say no thank you."

She remained still, listening, so he went on.

"If we bring everyone here," he said, "we're setting up for a fight. Is it one we can win? I have no idea."

"We can't," she said. "You and I both know that."

"I was trying to be optimistic."

"Just be honest. That's what I need right now."

Baird nodded, gravely.

"Okay, so it's probably a last stand, but at least we go down fighting. Or, if I can sneak a bit of optimism in there, maybe it buys us enough time for a solution to present itself."

"What kind of solution?"

He shrugged. "Maybe we come up with a virus that kills them off. Or a new tactic we haven't thought of yet. Maybe we get the Hammer working properly—"

"You had me up until there," Jinn said, "but I cannot believe you're going to sit here and suggest that, after what happened." The prone form of JD was all the punctuation that sentence needed. Baird nodded, almost ceding the point.

"Well, we're not going to defend the walls with DeeBees," he asserted. "If we're going to stay and fight, and we can't use the Hammer or the

robots, then there's only one choice left." Jinn said nothing. He had, for the hundredth time it seemed, reached the line she refused to cross.

"Gears," Baird said, pressing his luck.

Again with an effort Jinn stood, refusing the hand he offered her. She went to the window and looked out. It was perhaps the first time since he'd entered the room that she wasn't looking at JD.

"If you're going to double down on bringing everyone here," Baird went on, "then you need to ask them as they come in the gate, 'Can you shoot?' If the answer is yes, you put a Lancer in their hands and send them up to the walls. That's the only way we have a chance."

"There is a part of me, Damon," she replied, "that sees that as surrounding the seat of this government with armed Outsiders."

"They aren't the enemy, Jinn."

"Not now, no."

"Jinn… come on. This isn't the time to be playing the long game, is it?"

She seemed about to reply, but went silent again instead.

"It's like you said," he added, "we're running out of options. We need to take the ones we have left, before they're gone, too."

"They have no training, no discipline."

He shrugged. "So we train them. The regimen Del and I created for the DeeBees can be adapted. It's quick, too." He left its ineffectiveness unsaid.

"We're getting ahead of ourselves, though." Jinn turned toward him. "First we have to convince them to come."

"Kait seems the perfect ambassador to help with that."

"Yes," Jinn replied. "Well, I'd hoped JD would convince her, but now… and it doesn't matter how many times I call her 'Corporal,' the honorary rank just slides right off her like a… like a bad smell."

"Then what you need is some deodorant." He held up a hand. "That didn't come out right." Jinn glared at him. Or, he thought she did. It was hard to tell in the dark. "Sorry," he said again, "I promised not to joke around."

"No," Jinn replied. "No, you may have a point there."

"I do?" When she didn't answer, Baird felt his stomach tighten. "Why do I feel like I just gave you an idea that I'm going to regret?"

Jinn ignored that. Which was just as worrying.

"That will be all, Damon."

4: STICK TO THE PATH

Another week passed with no change in JD's status.

The Swarm continued to harass settlements, Outsider villages, and anyone else they could find. With each day, like some creeping vine, they were getting a little closer to New Ephyra. Kait could feel the tension in the city, and something else now, too. The respect and admiration she so often saw in the eyes of people she passed in the street. It was eroding. A look of hope turning to despair and even accusation.

It was a look that said, *"Why are you here? You should be out there, fighting them!"*

There was only one honest reply, but it wasn't one even Kait could bring herself to give.

"It's no use."

And then, of course, anyone who did know her would have something else on their mind.

"How's JD? Any change?"

Any change. *Any* fucking change. How sick she'd grown of that question. She'd shake her head. She'd move on.

Kait spent most of her time now in Baird's compound, avoiding the questions or the looks of the people. Avoiding Jinn. Avoiding everything, really, except the one thing she couldn't get away from. Her nightmares.

The only thing that worked was total exhaustion, so she'd spend her time exercising. Lifting weights, sparring with Del or Cole or Marcus, running endlessly along the paths through Baird's "yard," which was more like a small forest.

This had given Baird an idea.

Kait and Del waited as he made the final preparations. For Del's part he looked bored, still half asleep. Kait had been up before dawn, though, and

had an idea of what Baird was planning. She stretched as he talked, shaking the fatigue from her arms and legs. Rolling her neck as far as her armor would allow.

"Here's what we're going to do," he said finally. Baird pointed to the landscape. Two ponds, a half-dozen copses of trees, hedges, grass, and off to one side his "shed" that was the size of a small warehouse. Among all this, new as of this morning, was a training course. Beams of wood to climb over, or under. Ropes on which to swing across muddy pits. The works.

"I've enabled sensors in your armor. Biometrics. You two are going to be the benchmark, so I need your best effort. Once the course is optimized, we'll recreate it in several places around the city, so those who wish to help out can be evaluated."

"By 'help out,'" Del said, "you mean fight."

Baird spread his hands, smiling. "Such a smart guy! Well done." The smile vanished as quickly as it had appeared. "Yes, to fight. The DeeBees aren't cutting it."

"Understatement of the year," Kait muttered.

"Jinn's cool with this?" Del asked, pointing at the course. "Seems, I don't know, contrary to her policies."

"Let me worry about Jinn," Baird replied. "Okay. Kait, you'll be setting a time for women and men. Del, you'll set the benchmark for children and the elderly."

"Very funny." Del wasn't laughing.

Kait did, though. A little bit.

"GO!" Baird shouted.

Instantly she turned and launched into a sprint, then realized what she should have noticed five minutes ago. Del was only pretending to be tired. He already had a full stride on her as they reached the first obstacle: a single rope suspended over a mud puddle twenty feet across.

"It's not a competition!" Del shouted over his shoulder, and she could hear the glee in his voice as he leapt for the only way across the thick muddy patch.

Del caught the rope and swung.

If Kait waited for the rope to swing back, this would be over before it even really started. So she launched herself forward and up, legs and arms stretched out in front of her. The mud exploded around her feet when she hit, sending a huge spray up into the air, her face, and under her armor.

Kait knew this yard well, though, and she knew how Baird and Sam cared for it. She doubted he'd dig too deep in creating a mud pit, and she was right. It was perhaps six inches to the bottom. Still a total bastard to get through, but not the waist-deep slog it was meant to look like.

By the time she came out the other side her boots were full of the muck, though, and weighing her down. Kait kicked them off and hopped as she pulled her socks away, too, tossing them aside. Free of the encumbrance she

raced on, already ten steps behind Del. Barefoot, though, Kait Diaz could practically fly.

Especially on a well-maintained lawn.

The countless hours she'd spent jogging around this place were about to pay off, she hoped. Kait turned slightly and hurdled a low hedge, bypassing a tight curve in the trail. Del, who'd followed the path like a good sportsman, threw a glance over his shoulder when he realized she'd closed half the gap in only a few seconds.

"Already resorting to cheating?" he asked. "I should have known!"

Kait threw all her energy into the rise and fall of her legs, the placement of her steps, the rhythm of her arms.

"Baird… never said… to stick to the path…"

Del grunted.

They were neck-and-neck when they reached the climbing wall. At the top, though, Kait stopped. There were DeeBees coming in through the back gate, and several Gears in armor, too. Del didn't see them, and kept on going. He jumped down, rolled, and was halfway to the next obstacle when he realized Kait had stopped.

"Giving up already?" he asked, panting, hands on his knees. Then he saw where she was looking and turned to face the group coming up the path. "That's never good," he said, just loud enough for Kait to hear.

She jumped down from the climbing wall and came to a stand at its base, waiting. One of the Gears marched up to her. He looked her up and down, then shrugged.

"Kait Diaz?"

"Uh-huh."

"First Minister Jinn would like to see you."

Kait eyed him, then matched his shrug. "Tell her I'll be there in an hour. I need to get changed."

"She said… uh… she said to escort you to Government House… right away." A clump of mud fell from her armor just then, splashing onto the ground between them.

"Ah yes," she said. "Government House. Marble floors. Nice carpets. Right, then, lead the way."

The man hesitated, eyes on the splash of fresh mud on the grass at their feet. Caught in that space between following an order and following common sense, he did what she knew he would. Turned and gestured for her to come along.

* * *

If Jinn cared about her appearance, she kept it well hidden.

The First Minister did, however, ask her to come out onto the balcony. They stood side by side at the railing there, looking out over the city. It

gleamed in the morning light, Kait thought. As if nothing was wrong. Sunlight danced off roof tiles. The trees along the main avenue swayed slightly in a warm breeze.

Jinn had her hands on her belly, a pose she took more and more often as her pregnancy progressed.

"I'm getting impatient," the First Minister finally said, and Kait knew immediately what this was about. It wasn't JD. That, she supposed, was good.

"I suppose," Jinn went on, "I've finally come to realize that calling you Corporal isn't going to make it be true."

"Sheer force of will only goes so far," Kait commented, stalling for time, still not ready for this.

"You need to decide, Kait."

So much for stalling. Kait tried, though. She watched the city below. The silence became a tangible thing.

"Perhaps you're wondering, why now?" Jinn added. "What's changed?"

"I wasn't, but now that you mention it… why now? What's changed?" And then it hit her. "JD's woken up. Or… no… is he… is he gone?"

Before she finished Jinn was already shaking her head, though, and she even put a reassuring hand on Kait's arm.

"No, nothing like that. There's been no news from the hospital."

Kait nodded, easing herself back from the swell of emotion. A part of her, a small part, wondered if Jinn had done that on purpose. To see her reaction. To find out if she still cared. Kait found that she desperately wanted to change the subject.

"So, why then? What *has* changed?"

"Strategy," Jinn replied. "I've been consulting with Baird, with Marcus. My advisors and staff, the leadership of the city itself."

Kait hadn't felt as if the city had any leadership other than Mina Jinn, but she let it go.

"It is time we start bringing people here, to New Ephyra."

"You mean, whether they want to come or not."

Jinn nodded. "Some have taken the invitation, some have been forced here by circumstances, but many more have held out. Refused, even."

"That's their right," she said, an old anger flaring up inside her.

"Under any other circumstances I'd agree with you." Jinn seemed to steel herself for what she wanted to say next, which to Kait was a rather remarkable achievement. She'd never met anyone as stern.

"I would still prefer, of course, that those still outside the walls—"

"—Outsiders—"

"Yes, the Outsiders specifically. I would still prefer that they choose to come, and if nothing yet has convinced them to make that choice, perhaps one of their own could do it."

"Ah," Kait said.

"Especially if that person was an example of what integration can look like."

"A corporal, let's say."

"And yet also an Outsider. A path for them to follow."

Kait said nothing.

Jinn turned to her. "After Settlement 2—"

"If you want my help," Kait snapped, "I highly suggest you don't bring that place up." But Jinn, hardened steel that she was, did not flinch.

"After Settlement 2, I am convinced that the only real option left to us is to gather inside these walls. There is strength in numbers. Real strength."

"The Outsiders will see it as a prison camp."

The First Minister dipped her chin, an acknowledgement so quick and perfect that Kait realized this conversation had gone exactly how the woman intended. Kait folded her arms, immediately defensive and also immediately wondering if that, too, was what Jinn expected.

Two can play at that game.

"Why bring them here, though?" Kait said.

"What do you mean?"

"Why save the Outsiders at all? They're a threat to everything this place stands for. And, Jinn, let me tell you, if you thought you had a riot on your hands in Settlement 2, wait until there's a bunch of freethinking survivalists inside your walls. Even if I could convince them to come here—and I'm not saying I will—controlling them after that point… well, let's just say that after Settlement 2, I think I see the sorts of tactics you'll use to accomplish that. Why you think I'd bring people here to face the end of a gun, well, it's beyond me."

"Not the end of a gun," Jinn said. "The stock."

At first Kait imagined Outsiders being clubbed into submission by DeeBees, but then something Jinn had said earlier finally registered, matching the tone of the woman's words.

"'A path for them to follow…'" Kait repeated. "'An example of integration.' You meant that literally."

Jinn simply waited.

A wind kicked up, cold and stiff. Kait shifted, heard the cracking of the mud that had dried and hardened on her armor. Clumps fell to the immaculate tiles at her feet. Outside muck in a manicured place. She shook her head.

"Can we agree, then," Mina Jinn asked, "that concentrating our population here is the best—perhaps *only*—option left to us?"

No matter how hard she tried, Kait couldn't find a convincing argument to the contrary. She nodded.

"And can we agree," the woman went on, "that of all the people currently here, you are ideally suited to be my ambassador on such a mission?"

Again Kait nodded. It was true.

Didn't mean it was right.

But then, she supposed, nothing was right anymore. Only the bad options remained. A memory came to her, unbidden. Camping with her parents, she was maybe six years old.

* * *

In the night they were surrounded by wild beasts, though Kait couldn't tell what sort of beasts. All she saw was their glowing eyes. All she heard was the hungry growls. Even in that moment of danger, her parents sought to teach her. It was the whole point of those trips, and they weren't ones to waste an opportunity.

"Learn to spot the leader," Reyna whispered to her as she unsheathed her dual machetes and shifted into an attack stance. "It's the leader you need to take out first. The rest will usually scatter."

Kait, tiny and—though it was tough to admit to herself—quite terrified, stepped closer to the center of their camp as Reyna angled herself toward her chosen target. She backed into her father, as both parents instinctively put Kait between them. Protective, even when teaching her to survive.

"Dad," Kait whispered, gripping the leg of his trousers. He had his own machete in hand by then, and spared a glance down at her. He put one arm in front of her, easing her back behind him.

"When there are no good options," Gabe said, "start with the one least likely to get you killed. Work up from there."

They moved at the same moment, but in very different ways. Reyna darting out, blades slashing, going for the beast whose eyes were highest from the ground, and who made the most menacing growl. Gabe, by contrast, suddenly kicked out. He'd shifted a log from the fire onto his foot, and his motion sent it flying, a trail of sparks and embers in its wake, into the face of the nearest animal.

Without hesitation he threw his machete at another. A small one. Timid. Already backing away. It fell with a yelp. Before Kait could even gasp, her father had drawn an old pistol from his rucksack and fired a shot into the air. The deafening sound sent the rest of the animals scurrying back into the darkness.

All save two. The one at which Gabe had thrown his blade, and the leader. Reyna stood over that monster, now just a pile—a frighteningly large pile—of gray fur and limbs in the dirt, blood pooling around it.

"See?" Reyna asked.

"See?" In the same moment her father asked the same.

* * *

Funny, Kait suddenly thought, how each of them had seen their tactic as the only option. Which proved they *weren't* the only options. And each had, in their own view, made the right choice. Or, rather, the "least wrong one." She hadn't been old enough to spot this contradiction then.

She'd just marveled at them both.

Not long after that, Gabe had passed on, and so it was Reyna's teachings that eventually became ingrained in Kait Diaz. For better or worse, she was her mother's daughter.

"I can't help you, Jinn," Kait said. "I'll give you the armor back, if you need me to, but after learning what your orders did to JD at Settlement 2, I'm not interested in being 'Corporal' Diaz. I'd appreciate it, by the way, if you stopped 'accidentally' calling me that."

She turned away then, figuring there was no need to wait to be dismissed. Kait walked through Jinn's gleaming office, bare feet making a slapping sound on the clean floor, leaving a second trail of mud and grit. She made it to the door before Jinn called out to her, stress evident in her voice.

"Do you plan to leave before he wakes up?"

Kait stopped dead, the door handle grasped tightly in her fist.

"It wouldn't be ideal," Jinn added, more calmly, "but if I can't have you acting as official COG ambassador, could you still be an independent voice? As we both agreed, getting people here is the important thing. The rest can be sorted out later."

Hackles raised and blood in her ears, Kait wanted nothing more of this verbal swordfight. She left without answering.

But she knew Jinn was probably right.

* * *

By the time Kait strode into the vast lobby of Government House, most of the mud had shaken loose from her uniform. She took a little bit of perverse pleasure in imagining the cleaning efforts that would result from her visit here today.

Yet as she crossed the great chamber she saw that the floor had already been cleaned. A little robot with a broom attached to an articulated arm rolled slowly along one wall, scooping up the last remnants of the mud she'd left on the way in.

Ringed with great pillars that lined an inner space lit by shafts of golden sunlight streaming in through a glass ceiling, the space never failed to cause the breath to catch in her throat. Kait tried to keep her eyes forward this time, and found it nearly impossible.

"Ms. Diaz?"

The voice came from off to her right somewhere. A deep, sonorous voice. One she didn't recognize and yet felt she'd heard before. Turning, she slowed, then stopped. In the shadow between two pillars was a man. He sat

in a wheelchair, yet even half-hidden in darkness he somehow gave off an air of strength.

"Do I know you?" Kait asked.

He wheeled forward, slow but steady. The man was very old, but sat straight in his chair. He wore a uniform that seemed practically covered in medals.

"We haven't met," he replied, "but I knew your father. A long time ago." As Kait stood in stunned silence he wheeled over to her and held out a hand. "Colonel Hoffman," he said. "Victor Hoffman. It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Kait."

It took her a long second before she remembered to reach out and take the offered hand.

"I wonder," he said, "if you could spare a few minutes and wheel me around the plaza?"

5: A DECORATED RELIC

She pushed Colonel Hoffman's chair out onto the great plaza in front of the government building, easing him down the steps one at a time. He pointed toward a park off to one side, and soon they were among trees and fishponds, rather than the bustle of the city.

The park was dotted with war memorials. Some were old, made of stone long since blackened by mold and city air. Others were new, gleaming and golden. Hoffman seemed to ignore them, content to be pushed until they reached a great flowering tree at the very back of the park. There was a bench beneath it.

"Here's fine," he said, pointing to a spot beside the bench. Kait could see the patches where his chair's tires had crushed the fallen leaves in the spot, and wondered how much time the legendary soldier spent sitting here.

She hesitated, unsure if her duty was done and she should leave him to it, but after a second he inclined his head toward the bench.

"Sit with me for a while?"

She sat, and looked around. In this place it was as if the city didn't exist. The trees, the undulating hills of the park, and an outer wall along one edge: all combined to block any sight of the great metropolis around them. Even the sounds were largely muted. It was impossibly peaceful, she thought. More so even than Baird's private grounds.

"I'd heard you were here, in New Ephyra," Hoffman said. "Been wanting to meet you, but our paths hadn't yet crossed. This is a happy coincidence, running into you like this."

"Sorry," Kait replied, feeling somewhat disarmed by the genial man. "I just came from a meeting with the First Minister. Don't take it personally, but I'm guessing this is no coincidence."

Hoffman put a hand over his heart. "Honest truth, Ms. Diaz—and the

only thing I'll take personally from that accusation is some pride in the idea that you think I'm still important enough for Mina Jinn to put me into the field." He grinned at her. "The sad truth is I'm barely tolerated around that building anymore. A relic, but a decorated relic. None of them can quite find it in themselves to ask me to leave."

"I doubt that," Kait replied, then she quickly added, "the 'barely tolerated' part, I mean. Try being an Outsider."

He chuckled at that, and Kait smiled in spite of herself.

"How'd you get all covered in mud?" he asked suddenly.

Kait grimaced. "Helping Damon Baird perfect a new COG training course."

The war hero stared at her now, his gaze suddenly brimming with sly intelligence.

"No offense, but that doesn't sound like a typical Outsider activity."

"You've got me there."

He smiled again, and it seemed a bit sad. "Mind if I ask what you were meeting with the First Minister about?"

A trio of King Ravens flew high overhead just then, their engines *whump*ing in unison. Kait glanced up, glad for the sudden distraction. It gave her a moment to think. She decided, as the helicopters passed out of view, that she wanted to trust this man.

"She wants me to help convince the Outsiders to come here," she replied. "For their protection."

"And?"

Kait glanced at him, impressed.

"Let me guess," he said, before she could answer. "She wants you to make the title of 'Corporal' official first."

"How'd you know about…"

"I spend a lot of time being a nuisance in the records department," Hoffman said. "It's the one office left that really tolerates me being around. They deal in history, and I *am* history—Special Forces—so it works out well. I had a high-level security clearance, before I retired."

Sensing more, Kait waited.

"I looked you up," he said. "Well, I looked Gabriel up. I check in on your father once in a while, always curious about whatever happened to him. Then, a few weeks back, to my considerable surprise, there was a new file with the name Diaz on it."

Kait didn't know what to say about that. It shouldn't be a surprise, she supposed, that they had a file for her, but it still grated. Of course they had a file on her father. She wondered why she hadn't sought it out before.

"Why would you be checking his file?" she asked. "It's not like there will be any new entries."

"Only knew him while he was in the COG," Hoffman said. "After he left… well, details become scarce."

"He never talked about it much," Kait said. "The COG part of his life. I only knew him as an Outsider."

Hoffman shifted, and there was a sudden brightness in his eyes. *He's been hoping for this*, Kait realized.

"Then perhaps we can educate one another," he suggested. "Put together the whole picture."

"Wait… so the file doesn't have *anything* on my father after he left the COG?"

"No comment."

Unable to help herself, Kait raised her eyebrows. "That's a… loaded answer." She tried to remember what she knew about Hoffman, and drew a blank.

"Tell me, Kait. What do you know of your father's career in the military?"

A sound caught her ear that moment. Somewhere beyond the park's wall, a vehicle puttered down the avenue. An older model, its gas-powered engine sputtering with each change of gear.

* * *

"There," Gabe said. "Let's give that a try. Reyna?"

Kait glanced from the grease-smeared hands of her father to the strained face of her mother. He was leaning over the engine of an old, derelict truck they'd come across. She was in the cab, dutifully turning the key whenever another attempt was made to fix the ancient engine.

Kait darted the yards between the engine and the driver's door. She hopped up onto the step there, placed her tiny hands on Reyna's leg, and watched as her mom tried the engine once again.

The machine seemed to cough, and cough again… and then it made a noise that sounded to Kait like an animal laughing, before Reyna finally let the key go. She rocked her head back into the seat cushion.

"It's hopeless, babe. Can we forget it already?"

Kait was already back in the dirt, running to the front of the truck, around its headlight, and climbing onto the front bumper to be beside her father.

"Hold that," he said, pointing to a hose that connected to seemingly random points on the engine. The rubber was brittle between her fingers.

"Feels like it's going to crack," she said.

"It very well might. Time and exposure to the elements will do that."

Kait nodded, thinking she probably understood, or at least fairly sure she'd work it out later before they fell asleep.

It was their third night out from Fort Umson. Three nights to go. This was her parents' idea of a vacation. Walk off into the woods with no map or supplies, until someone got too hungry to go on—Kait, in other words—then they'd figure out how to survive the return journey.

That Kait had managed to go three days without complaining of hunger was something of an achievement to her father. He'd positively beamed when she'd finally asked if they could hunt, or find some berries. Reyna had been… Kait didn't know the right word. It wasn't quite disappointment, but something close to that.

"How did you learn to fix these?" Kait asked. It seemed an innocent enough question, but her father froze for a moment. Gradually he began to fiddle with a loose bundle of wiring again. The words came only after a long time spent in silence.

"Before I met your mom," he said, "I was in the military. Worked in something called the motor pool. Fixing vehicles a lot like this one."

"I thought you were a soldier?"

"Just because someone's in the military, doesn't mean they're a soldier. There are all kinds of jobs to do in the Army." He gestured. "Okay, let that go. Hold this one now, but don't touch that metal bit, it's hot."

Kait adjusted her hand as instructed.

"Was Mom in the military, too?"

At that her father laughed. "No, no. Definitely not." He paused, considering her. "Though, ironically, she acts more like a soldier than I do, sometimes."

"What do you mean?"

"This truck, for example." He raised a hand that was smeared entirely black now, and gestured to the engine. "Reyna sees this truck and thinks, 'It's not part of the plan. Let's keep moving.' Once something is decided, it's decided. Whereas I…"

He used a knuckle to rap on the underside of the hood.

"Again!"

This time Kait didn't move to watch her mom try to start the truck. She had an important job, and wanted to hear the rest of what her dad was telling her.

The cough was the same, but then it turned into a low, even hum. The engine started this time.

"Whereas I…?" she prompted.

"Whereas I saw this truck and thought, 'Hmm, maybe change the plan. Improve it. Redo it.'" He eased the hood shut with far more care than the old vehicle needed, and rubbed his hands down the front of his shirt, leaving two dark smears.

"Most of the soldiers I knew followed the plan."

"Not you?"

"Not always," he replied, guiding her to the cab. "Most of the time I was the one making them."

* * *

"He was in the motor pool," Kait said, as the memory faded.

"The motor pool," Hoffman repeated, his gaze fixed on the horizon.

"Is that—" Kait started, then steeled herself for what the answer might be to this question. "Is that a lie?"

"No." Hoffman shook his head. "Not exactly." He seemed about to say more, but his hesitation turned into a pause, then a silence. She waited a while, then decided maybe a change of subject was in order.

"What do you know about the time after he left?"

Glad of the segue, he brightened a little. "Bits and pieces, really. I know he left with Reyna, and they became Outsiders, though that term wasn't used back then."

"Oh? What did they call them?"

"The Stranded," Hoffman said. "All those who couldn't reach Jacinto Plateau in time were called that, at first."

Kait marveled at the subtext behind that statement. "Stranded" was a term for someone who needed help, or rescue. It said a lot that this term morphed into "Outsider" over time.

He went on. "There were reports, after that. People saying they'd run into him at one place or another. Sometimes chance encounters, sometimes because the Outsiders had raided their supplies. The last thing I heard was that he'd passed on."

"Rustlung," Kait said, and she shivered involuntarily. That was a part of her childhood she rarely visited.

"I… I'm very sorry."

"Not your fault," she assured him. Something passed across his wizened features at that. Her words had been automatic, pure politeness, but now she wondered if she'd made a mistake in saying them.

"And Reyna?" he asked.

A coldness settled over her like a shawl.

"Gone now, too. The Swarm."

Hoffman winced. His rigid posture seemed to drain of its strength, as the man's shoulders slumped.

After a long pause he asked, "What of Gabe's brothers?"

Kait thought she'd misheard. "Oscar, you mean? He only had one brother."

"Yes, of course." The Colonel raised a hand slightly, flustered. "Oscar."

"He's still kicking around," Kait said. "Up north, with a new village. Our village was… the Swarm…"

Hoffman nodded, and an impatience entered his manner now that hadn't been there a minute before.

"Can you tell me something about my father?" she asked, hoping to put him at ease again. "From before he met Reyna, I mean? What was he like?"

"Ahh, well…" he started, then squinted slightly as he seemed to gather his thoughts. "You probably think of him as someone who left the COG.

Went rogue to start an Outsider village with his wife. Something like that?"

She shrugged. He had it exactly, but admitting so—knowing he was probably about to contradict it—made her feel naive.

"Your father…" Again a pause. This was a man who'd dealt with secret operations for most of his long career, she realized. That fact alone made Kait wonder if the pause was the real story here.

"Your father was a brilliant man," he continued. "Always even-tempered, always *thinking*. Never knew a Gear who could adapt so quickly to a situation, and make something out of nothing, as well as Gabe Diaz. A master tactician, your father."

"Wow," she said. "And all that in the motor pool? Damned impressive." She regretted the sarcasm almost as quickly as she gave it. He threw her a sidelong glance, the corner of his mouth ticking up slightly in a mischievous grin.

"Well," he said, "I need to be getting back. I grow tired more easily now than when I was your age. Or twice your age, come to think of it."

"Can I assist—" she offered, disappointed that he wasn't going to tell her more. Kait tried to think of something she might say to prompt him, but he spoke up quickly.

"No, no. I have to push this damn thing myself most of the time. Doctor's orders."

"Oh. Well, okay," she said. "It was nice meeting you, Colonel Hoffman."

"And you, Ms. Diaz." He took her hands in his and smiled up at her. "We'll speak again, Kait."

"I'll hold you to that."

"Count on it."

6: A TRUE OUTSIDER

The first Minotaur truck labored up onto the rock-strewn plateau and trundled along a poorly maintained path toward the village wall.

"Stop here," Kait ordered.

The driver complied, but did not cut the engine. Kait glanced at him.

"We're exposed here," he said. Then added, "Ma'am."

She eyed him, but held her tongue. She had yet to take the rank Jinn had offered her, but had to agree that pretending to wield that slight bit of authority had its uses.

"Exactly," Kait replied. "Arrive with open arms and weapons visible. That's how Outsiders do it. You look like you're hiding something? They assume you are, and that you have a reason to do so."

"But—"

"Are we hiding something, Private?"

"No, ma'am."

"Then kill the engine and get out."

He looked uncomfortable, but complied, and she stepped from her door at the same moment. Gravel crunched under her boots. A thin sheen of ice had accumulated on the larger rocks, melting in places, making the road slick and treacherous. A light drizzle of rain just made it worse. Kait moved carefully to the side of the Minotaur and rapped with one knuckle.

Del emerged a moment later, stretching.

"Are we there yet?" he asked. Then he looked past Kait. "Oh, shit, we actually are. I was kidding. How long was I out?"

"Three hours," Kait replied. "And then another three."

He yawned one more time, then shook his head in an attempt to banish the last vestiges of sleep.

"Damn," he said, taking in the surroundings. "This place is creepy."

"It's okay," Kait replied.

Del wasn't having it, though. "Wish we could have brought Jack."

"A robot like that, following us around, wouldn't be the ideal start to a meeting like this."

"I know," he replied, "but I'd still feel better if he was here."

Kait could feel eyes on her from the village wall, but the Outsiders weren't showing themselves. No surprise there. She turned her back on the village, walking toward the approaching Minotaurs that made up the rest of their convoy. Making a slicing motion across her neck, she pointed at the side of the path.

"You sure?" the nearest driver asked through his window.

"I'm sure," she replied. "Don't come up unless you hear from me. No one gets out until I give the all clear."

"Copy that."

Satisfied, she kept walking, farther and farther from the village. There were probably four sniper scopes trained on her back, but no one shot. She was unarmed, after all. The Outsiders would be jumpy—a fleet of COG vehicles had just rolled up to their gates, after all—but not *that* jumpy.

"Uh, Kait?" Del said over the comm. "Village is over this way."

"I know."

"Then where—"

"Just trust me, okay? I've got this." Passing the last Minotaur, she strode on through the misty precipitation. Kait had spotted the place on the way in, studiously ignoring it as they drove by. Now she made straight for it. She had thirty seconds, she figured.

Stepping off the path, she weaved between several large boulders until she reached the fossilized old tree. Leaning against the nearest rock she folded her arms, trying to look casual.

The first of them emerged only seconds later.

He didn't see her.

It was an older man with a long gray beard. Impossibly thin, and though he was fifteen feet away Kait could smell him already. The old-timer blinked as he emerged into the sunlight, and checked the rifle he held. Then he turned and ushered four more Outsiders out of the hollowed tree trunk. It was only when all five were clear and organizing themselves that Kait cleared her throat.

"Hey there, Pasco," she said.

The group froze. The old man, their leader, turned and squinted until he finally spotted her against the rock.

"Who the hell…" he said. "Reyna Diaz? That you? Holy—"

"It's Kait, actually."

He stepped closer. Looking her up and down.

"So it is. Holy shit, so it is!"

"How are you, Salvador?" she asked, using his actual name. This caused

a stir from the group behind him. No one called him that, except Reyna. Kait was playing her best card early. Why not? She pushed off from the rock and readied for the other shoe to drop.

Salvador Pasco was a true Outsider, as Reyna told it. A hermit most of his life, living in the wilds, occasionally stealing supplies from the COG and Outsiders alike. Until, again as Reyna told it, loneliness finally got the better of him. He'd rescued a lost child, wandering in the forest, and taken care of her until her parents had shown up. That day, Reyna had almost killed the scrawny old bastard on sight, but Gabe had seen something in him—or maybe in Kait—when he'd put a hand on Reyna's arm and convinced her to lower her blade.

Kait had been too young to really understand what was going on, or what "hermit" even meant. From her perspective, aged four, she'd wandered off and met a "wizard" in the forest. Any feeling of danger she should have gotten from him was vastly outweighed by the relief that she was no longer alone, and she'd followed him like a stray dog back to his little hovel deep in the woods.

They might never have found her if Kait hadn't convinced the man to make her some tea. The curl of smoke from his camp stove had been what Reyna and Gabe had spotted.

"Been a long time," Pasco muttered, and he came over to embrace her. He stopped, though, when he finally caught a glimpse of her COG armor under the parka she'd pulled on.

"The hell?" he said, glancing up at her and taking a step back, suddenly wary. His eyes, still keen despite his years, immediately darted to the tops of the boulders around them. With his left hand he made a gesture behind his back, and instantly the other Outsiders spread out, taking defensive positions.

"It's not a trap, Sal," she said. "You can relax."

"Like hell I can."

"We're here to talk. To help."

"Don't need any help," he said. "Didn't ask for any."

"I know, but the truth is, you *do* need help." The light drizzle suddenly became something more. Big drops that hit the ground like tiny bombs, splashing off the rock-strewn landscape. "Can we go inside and talk? Maybe make me some tea, for old time's sake?"

It was the wrong thing to say. Salvador frowned.

"You're not four anymore, Kait. Any ability you had to get ol' Pasco to do your bidding is *loooong* gone."

He was lying, though. She could see it. Finding Kait, caring for her for three days until her parents had found her, the subsequent friendship he'd enjoyed with Reyna and Gabe—and later Oscar—had not totally drained away. He still had a soft spot for Kait Diaz, the little girl who'd ended his days of isolation. Now he ran a village himself. Maybe not the most

successful village, nor the prettiest one, but a village all the same.

It had been at least fifteen years since she'd seen him, though, and the change in her circumstances would be a tough pill to swallow. She'd have to take this slow. Play the game the Outsider way.

"Tea?" she asked again, affecting a childish tone that dripped with sarcasm.

"Ahhhhh, fuck. Alright then."

* * *

"Sal, meet Del," she said. "Del, this is Sal."

"Everyone calls me Pasco," the gruff man said, "including you. Only Reyna gets away with Sal. I'm still deciding if Kait can get away with it."

Del extended a hand. The Outsider hesitated, then took it. They were standing next to the Minotaur that had brought her there. The rest of the Gears were still in their trucks, watching nervously and, in some cases, with open skepticism at the man's appearance.

"Why don't you join us, Del?" Sal asked. "As usual, Kait wants tea, and I can't say no to her. Might as well make it a party, eh?" He burst into laughter and marched by. His contingent followed, one of them deliberately shouldering Del as he passed.

Del glanced at Kait and mouthed, *"What the fuck?"* She shook her head at him, trying for, *"Relax, I've got this."* Del seemed to get the idea and stepped aside to let her pass.

He quickly fell in beside her, one hand on her arm, slowing her to let a bit of distance grow between them and their hosts.

"You know this guy?" he asked out the side of his mouth.

"From a long time ago," Kait said, nodding. "Arguably I'm the reason he became an Outsider."

"He used to be COG?" Del couldn't quite keep his voice from rising.

"No. God, no. He was outside even the Outsiders. A loner, a survivalist in every sense."

Del digested that, watching the group in front of them.

"How'd you know they weren't inside the wall?"

Kait shrugged. "Remembered something Mom had told me about this place. A tunnel beneath the front approach. Sal's favorite gambit is to let people think the gate is poorly defended, then strike from behind, silently. Because I knew that, I also spotted the place they'd emerge."

"Damn," her friend replied. "Good thing you're here. I never would have seen it."

Kait elbowed him. "Keep on your toes, okay? That little tidbit is the beginning and end of my knowledge of this place, and Sal's got a reputation for being crafty. He'll have other tricks up his sleeve."

"Heard that!" the old-timer said from the front of the group, extending

a middle finger in their direction without looking back.

Del shook his head.

"Marcus is going to stay with the trucks?"

"Yeah. If Sal knows him it'll be by reputation, and that's a distraction we don't need."

Del let out a breath.

"This is going to be… interesting."

* * *

Kait sat in silence, sipping the strong tea as her father and Reyna spoke with the man who'd found her.

It was grown-up talk, but she listened. A lot of the words were strange to her, but some she knew, and she knew faces. If it had just been Mom here, Kait thought maybe the old man would be dead already.

Just a month earlier, their trade caravan had been attacked on the road by some raiders. One had grabbed Kait by the arm and pulled her close. Said something implying the girl would die if supplies weren't handed over.

Reyna had drawn and thrown her machete before Kait could even blink. The sound had been like a whisper, only inches from her ear, and then the bad man's iron grip had slackened. He'd crumpled to the ground. Soon there'd been a pool of red soaking into that grit, and Kait had stared at it as others died all around her.

"That's what happens when a stranger touches my daughter," Reyna had said that night at the campfire, to roars of approval from her fellow villagers. Kait had smiled at that, but she wasn't smiling now.

Sal was different, she thought. He hadn't grabbed her, hadn't done anything bad. He smelled, yeah, and his clothes were just rags, but his eyes were kind and he'd made her tea. It was sweet, honeyed, and had slivers of fresh ginger in it. He'd brought her in out of the rain, too, and made a fire for her to sleep by.

So Kait sat by her mom's side, pressed up against her not out of love or comfort, but to make the drawing of the knife harder to do. She didn't want to see blood on this dirt floor. Dad didn't either, apparently. He seemed to sense Sal's good nature, even though Mom still didn't.

Whenever Reyna's voice turned angry or suspicious, or when the graybeard said something that made him sound a bit odd, Dad would say just the right thing. He was keeping the knife in Reyna's scabbard as much as Kait was, she realized. It was like teamwork, and it felt good.

When they left, Sal was still alive. He waved at Kait when she looked back. They'd left him with his life, and an invitation to come to Fort Umson should he ever need shelter or a warm fire to sit by.

Sal had scoffed at that. He'd done just fine on his own for most of his life, he'd claimed.

A year later he showed up. Brought a gift for Kait. Herbal tea made from mountain wildflowers. He said he'd stay long enough to drink some with her. She was five, then, and he stayed not for an hour or a night, but for two whole years.

* * *

Sal watched her as she sipped the tea.

"It's just like I remember it," Kait said, smiling.

"You're a terrible liar, Kait Diaz."

"Didn't say it was good."

"I know it's not good!

It's also not how you remember it. No honey up here in this wasteland, and no one's trading any these days. In fact, no one's trading anything."

"That's sort of why we're here," Del said.

Sal ignored him. His eyes remained firmly on Kait, watching her expression with those squinty, keen eyes. It would have been unnerving if she didn't know him. His eyesight was terrible, unless he really put an effort into focusing. This in turn meant he could only get about an hour of decent vision before a raging headache would force him to relax.

Kait wondered if maybe the promise of a pair of glasses might get him to agree to come back to the city, but she discarded the idea right away. It wouldn't be gifts or the "better way of life" that would convince him. She'd get him the glasses no matter what, as soon as they arrived, because it was the right thing to do.

"It kills me a little bit to see you wearing Gear armor, Kait," he said. "Not sure what surprises me more—that you joined, or that they let you."

She shrugged, going for nonchalant.

"I didn't… I'm more like a liaison."

"Well," Sal said, sounding unimpressed, "get to the damn point then, Ambassador. Say your piece, then piss off. We don't have the supplies to entertain your little caravan, and no offense, but Gears aren't exactly welcome here." His eyes drifted to a point over her shoulder. The caravan outside his wall, the soldiers milling about.

For the first time since arriving, she felt guilty for this. Using her relationship, her credibility as an Outsider, as an icebreaker to achieve this meeting at all. It didn't feel right, but, deep down, she knew it had to be done.

"How is Reyna, anyway?" Sal asked abruptly. "Haven't seen her in, what, two years now?"

He saw the answer instantly in Kait's face.

"Oh, shit. I'm sorry, Kait."

She managed a nod. For some reason it hadn't occurred to her that news of Reyna's death might not have spread out here. It made sense, though.

With Sal at least. He ran his village like he ran his own life. Isolation and independence were in his blood.

He leaned over and put one hand on Kait's shoulder.

"Forget what I said earlier. You may call me by my first name, as your mother did."

Kait nodded. "Thank you."

The tender moment passed as quickly as it had begun. Sal leaned back again and studied her with fresh eyes.

"How'd it happen, if I might ask?" Sal then turned to the woman seated beside him. His wife or just the highest-ranked person here after him, Kait wasn't yet sure. "Can't imagine what could take down Reyna Diaz. Never met anyone with as much grit as that woman."

"That's… also… sort of why we're here," Del said.

Sal eyed him then, and the gravity in Del's tone finally registered.

"Go on then. Time you explained."

With the occasional extra comment from Del, Kait went through the brief history of the Swarm as matter-of-factly as she could. Sal was keenly interested in the telling of what happened at Fort Umson and, later, South Village. His face became a mask when she told him of Reyna's death, though his eyes glistened with tears. He'd always been more a friend of Gabe's than Reyna's, but his respect for Kait's mom was bottomless.

"Other villages have fallen since," Kait said. "Along… along with COG settlements."

"So what the hell are these things?"

"Locust," Del said, "sort of. They came out of the old burial sites. They're like… an evolution, or something. We're still not really sure."

"What we do know," Kait added, "is that they're growing, multiplying, and they're relentless. So far they've avoided cities and the larger COG bases. They're content with places like Fort Umson, or… like this." She cast her gaze up at the sky above them, and the lean-to shelters all around.

"Easy pickin's?" Sal asked.

"Well, yes."

"I'll take my chances."

"That's exactly what the other villages said. Before they vanished."

Salvador glared at her, the pride and defiance in his eyes faltering a little.

"If you ever left this place, you'd see," she added. "The villages near here… Holstead Croft, Five Pines… they're all empty. Everyone taken."

"Taken for what?"

"How do you think the Swarm is growing?" Del asked him.

"I want to hear it from her, soldier."

Del raised his hands in defeat. "I'll shut up then."

"Good."

"The Swarm…" Kait started, and she couldn't stop the image of Reyna in her final resting place, that disgusting growth holding her upright,

worming into her skin. "They take people and… convert them, somehow."

"Convert them? You mean…"

"Into more Swarm, yes."

For a long, silent moment he simply stared at her, his keen hard eyes inscrutable. Kait held the gaze.

After a time, Sal flicked a sidelong glance at Del, then returned his stare to Kait. "Is that what happened to your mother? Is she—"

"No," Kait said. "It didn't get that far."

"A mercy," he said.

She nodded.

Speaking carefully, Del said, "Their numbers are growing every day. Too big for any village to stand against them on their own."

"Good thing you've got all them robots then, huh?"

Kait shook her head. "The DeeBees aren't effective either. Even they have been coopted somehow."

"A lot of 'somehows' in this story, Kait."

"Yeah, well, unfortunately the Swarm haven't exactly been cooperating with our fact-finding efforts."

He grunted at that, then spat into the dirt beside him. No one else seemed to notice, but Kait saw the redness in the spittle that hit the dirt. She ignored it for now.

"What's this village called, anyway?" Del asked.

"It's called Pasco's Village."

"Right. 'Course it is."

Sal worked his jaw for a moment, his focus back on Kait.

"Alright, so… *and?* Still don't see what this has to do with us."

Here goes nothing, Kait thought.

"The Swarm are staying away from major population centers. So until we can find a way to defeat them, we're bringing everyone in to New Ephyra. It's the only way we can protect you."

Salvador Pasco burst into laughter.

His clan joined in, but not quite with the same enthusiasm. Either her words had gotten to some of them, or there was something more going on here. She thought of the blood in Sal's spit, and wondered.

"Fat fucking chance!" he exclaimed when he'd caught his breath.

Kait leaned in, unperturbed. "This is me talking here, Sal. Not the COG. It's the right move. Trust me, will you? I've seen the Swarm. Fought them. They took my mother from me. Almost got my uncle, too. They wiped out our entire village, and a dozen others. Yours will fall next. We know they're close. We know they're coming. Listen to me, Sal, you need to come with us. Not just leave, but leave with us." She paused, then went for broke. "Right now."

Sal stared at her for a long time, as silence returned to their palaver. Finally he spoke.

"You're dear to me, Kait Diaz. Always will be, and I owe a debt to your father that can never be repaid."

Kait wasn't sure what that was about, but let it go.

Sal went on. "But it goes against every bone in my body, everything I've ever stood for, to set foot in a COG city. *Especially* for protection."

Kait sighed.

"So thanks," Salvador added, "but no thanks."

"You refuse, then?"

He opened his mouth. Almost said yes, but then her tone registered.

"Hang on… hang on… what if I do?"

Kait shrugged. "You're coming with us, one way or another."

"Are we now?"

"Yup. These men have their orders."

A ripple of tension tore through the room. Hands to hilts. Eyes narrowing.

"What orders, exactly?"

"It's pretty straightforward." Kait gestured toward Del, and then toward the wall, beyond which lay the fleet of Minotaurs and the soldiers standing around them. Somewhere far beyond all that, New Ephyra. "Don't let the human race go extinct because of stubborn old feuds and stubborn old bastards like you." She grinned, in case he took that last bit too seriously.

Pasco wasn't smiling, though.

"How about this—" he said after a moment.

Kait cut him off. She'd anticipated it. "You're going to suggest that I stay here with you, and we send these Gears packing, right? That I join your village. That we can handle ourselves the Outsider way." She shook her head, slowly, with finality. "Sal, I mean it. The Swarm is as bad as I've said. Worse, even. The old ways aren't going to work."

"They've got me this far."

"And no farther," she replied. For his benefit, and his alone, she glanced down at the bloody spit he'd fired into the dirt. "I changed your life once before, Sal. Now I'm changing it again."

At last she saw it. The subtle shift in his features. The softening of that familiar intense stare.

She'd won.

Whatever that meant.

7: WAKING NIGHTMARE

Marcus Fenix sat beside Kait in the Minotaur's cab. He'd been silent for several miles now, but wasn't asleep. She was driving, and stole glances at him from time to time. In each instance his gaze was on the rust-colored horizon to their right.

"You awake?" she asked, knowing full well he was, but needing a conversation starter.

"Yeah."

"You're so damn quiet."

"I've been thinking about this strategy of Jinn's." The man turned in his seat slightly, away from the view and more toward her.

"Bringing Outsiders to the city?"

"Yeah."

"What about it?"

"It's too slow." He ran a hand over his face, trying to hide a yawn and mostly succeeding. "A lot of effort we just undertook for, what, fifty people?" Before she could say anything he went on. "And that one went smooth. You knew the leader. Won't be the case every time."

She'd considered this herself. "So we turn five of them into ambassadors like me. After the next five villages we'll have twenty-five, and so on."

"You really think they'll put the armor on, just like that?" Marcus stared at her. Kait pretended not to notice.

"I didn't even think *I'd* put it on," she admitted. "Still not sure about it."

"Proving my point." He lifted a canteen and took a swallow of water, then tossed the metal canister up onto the dash.

"Did you ever meet my father?" she asked.

"Hmm?"

"Gabriel Diaz."

Marcus thought about it for a moment. "Don't think so. Sorry."

"He fought in the Pendulum Wars. Worked in the motor pool."

"There were hundreds of motor pools, Kait. Every base had one."

"I just mean—"

"It's not a place I spent a lot of time. If the pool is doin' its job right, you don't need to spend time there. Maybe it's a testament to your dad's skill that I never met him, because when I did meet the wrenches it was usually to give 'em hell for fucking up."

Kait guided the Minotaur around a boulder in the road, and switched the headlights on. It was getting dark.

"It's a shit job," Marcus went on. "No one ever thanks you, and if you make the smallest mistake it'll cost lives, just about guaranteed. If you're thinking less of him because he wasn't on the front line—"

"It's not that."

"Then what?"

"Hoffman called him a brilliant tactician."

"When did you meet Hoffman?"

"A few weeks ago." She shrugged. "He was waiting for me when I left Jinn's office."

Marcus digested that for a second.

"Okay… and?"

"I'm just not seeing how 'brilliant tactician' and 'motor pool' go together."

"Sure he didn't say 'technician'?"

In reply, Kait just shot him a look.

"Maybe he used the wrong word, then," Marcus suggested. "Hoffman's… well there's no nice way to say it. He's not as sharp as he once was."

Kait decided not to press the matter. Partly because she didn't feel like going through the context of her meeting with Hoffman, but also because there was a Scion standing on the road ahead, holding a Mulcher chain gun against its hip and smiling at her. Its fangs gleamed red in the last light of the sun.

The creature stood perfectly still, though, and Kait knew this for what it was—another waking dream. The evolution of the Swarm-fueled nightmares that had plagued her sleep since Reyna's death. This vision seemed an echo of the Scion that had tried to stop them outside Settlement 2, and Kait was determined not to fall for the cruel trick her mind was trying to play on her. She ignored the horrid glare that bored through the windshield and into the most primal part of her brain. Gritting her teeth, Kait resolved to drive right through the apparition. She couldn't let these hallucinations affect her.

She couldn't let them win.

"Kait! Scion!" Marcus shouted.

Kait, certain the creature had been only in her mind, realized too late

how wrong she was. Marcus grabbed at the wheel, but she gripped it even harder, holding it steady. She mashed down on the accelerator.

The Outsiders in back all cried out in surprise.

As they zoomed toward the creature, the Scion hefted its Mulcher and opened fire. Bullets from the rotary barrels poured into the radiator grille at the front of the vehicle and on into the engine block. The dashboard before Kait went dark. The headlights, too, and the hum of the engine ground to a halt.

In the gravel and soft dirt, the Minotaur immediately started to lose speed.

Out of ammo, the Scion tossed its weapon aside. Free of the burden, it easily stepped out of the oncoming Minotaur's path and leapt onto the driver's door. Hanging on with one hand, it punched its other fist through the small window.

Glass shards flew into Kait's face. She barely had time to shut her eyes, and felt the lacerations across her cheek. Then a huge meaty fist had her hair, pulling her toward the window. The Minotaur had a heavily armored cab, with small windows, but this beast seemed determined to pull her through.

Marcus grabbed her right arm. Grip strong as iron, he tugged her back. The steering wheel was free to turn as it pleased, and it went hard right.

"Brace yourselves!" Marcus shouted to the Outsiders in the back.

Kait could feel the six-wheeled Minotaur tilting sickeningly up onto three wheels. There was a shriek from the left-side tires, and the world tumbled as the truck rolled onto its side.

The Scion was crushed as the heavy cab came down hard onto the gravel road and began to slide. Kait felt the grip on her hair loosen, then fall away completely. The creature was gone, smeared under the vehicle. Replacing it at the broken window was a spray of gravel just inches from her face, cutting into her cheek, forcing her to keep her eyes closed.

All at once the sliding stopped, and silence fell over the cab. Kait opened her eyes, tentatively. The air was full of dust that coated her throat the instant she took a breath. Marcus, beside her, coughed and twisted in his seat. With both legs he kicked upward, thrusting his door wide open.

"You okay?" he asked, already climbing.

"I think so. It's the people in back I'm worried about."

"Can't help them much if that Scion brought friends. C'mon."

She fumbled with the latch on her seat harness as Marcus's feet disappeared out the passenger door. Gunfire erupted all around them, and in the distance she could hear the sound of the rest of the caravan pulling to a sudden stop. Someone in the passenger compartment behind her was moaning. Others were shouting confused questions or half-hearted orders.

"SWARM!"

It was Marcus's bellowing shout that seemed to give everyone focus. Kait

heaved herself out of the cab and drew her pistol. There was movement all around. Yelps of Juvies. Grunts of nastier things. The air was choked with dust. Ten feet visibility, tops. She tried to blink her eyes clear, and mostly failed.

Something moved in front of her. A pale, scrawny, naked thing. She fired without thinking. The Juvie screamed and fell, lifeless, into the road.

"Protect the Outsiders," Marcus said.

Kait nodded, following orders instinctively now. Something she'd ponder later, maybe. Climbing along the truck to the rear, she hopped down. The canvas covering was intact on this side, but she doubted the length that had been dragged through fifty feet of gravel had fared so well.

Sal was fumbling his way out of the rear gate. He had an arm up in front of his face, and was coughing. A wet, thick cough that wasn't just from dust.

"You okay?" she asked.

"I'll live." He gestured toward the inside of the Minotaur. "A few broken arms, I think, but no worse than that."

Kait nodded.

"Is it them?" he asked, taking an offered rifle from someone still inside the truck. "The so-called Swarm?"

"Yeah," Kait replied. "Now you get to see what we're up against."

Before Sal could reply, a shadow came out of the dust, from above. Like a huge gaping mouth.

Kait barely had time to scream before the Snatcher took her.

8: ONE MORE SUNSET

Time seemed to slow.

Kait stared into the wide-open belly of the Snatcher as it landed over her. The innards were slime and gore, reeking of meat gone bad. This would be the last thing she ever saw, she thought, and then she was falling, fast. A sharp pain registered across the backs of her calves. She hit the dirt and the wind rushed from her lungs.

Above her, the Snatcher's gaping midsection snapped closed, robbed of its prize. Still it continued on as if it had grabbed her, perhaps not yet realizing it had missed.

There was a hand at her throat. Sal, grasping her by the top of her chest plate. With surprising strength, the wiry old man heaved her back to her feet in one smooth motion. It hurt to stand. She understood then that he'd kicked her legs out from under her, in effect forcing her to dodge the Snatcher's grasp. An amazing bit of clear-headed thinking, given the chaos around them.

Fighting for breath, she stared into the eyes of a man who'd saved her life once before, and now had done it again.

"The fuck was that?!" he shouted.

A raised eyebrow and quick sideways glance was all Kait could manage.

"Well, hot steamy shit," Sal muttered. "Maybe you were right after all." He thrust a rifle into her hands. *His* rifle, then took another from a shadowy figure inside the truck. His second-incommand, she realized. They'd brought weapons, along with all their other important belongings, and were handing them out.

"This truck's dead," Kait finally managed. "We need to get to one behind us." That meant trekking across a hundred feet of gravel road, exposed save for the still-choked air and the growing darkness.

"We run for it," Sal said. "Full sprint. No stopping. Everyone got that?"

Kait wanted to say that she'd give the orders here, but realized she would have said the same thing that he had. So she just nodded, and decided maybe it was best to let this man tell his villagers what to do.

Sal took one more glance at the place where the Snatcher had been. Then he spat a glob of red into the dirt there, and, with a clap on Kait's shoulder, took off into the dust. She limped after him, her calves still stinging.

They were halfway to the next Minotaur when the Snatcher returned. Kait only knew from the sound it made—that sudden shriek like a missile coming in at supersonic speeds. Behind her someone managed to make the shortest scream she'd ever heard, and then the sound was cut off. The Snatcher vanished back into the night, with a human being trapped in its belly. Who it had grabbed, she didn't know. Not the time to find out. She ran harder, willing her legs to work despite the pain.

Del emerged from the dusty cloud ahead of her, a pistol in each hand. He smiled, then shot at something just behind her. Kait heard another Juvie fall, but there were more coming from the rear of their group.

"Marcus?" he asked.

Kait shook her head. "Lost track of him."

Their eyes met. What she saw in Del's face matched her own fear. They'd lost him to a Snatcher once before, and though they'd found him alive later, it had been a very near thing. Kait had no desire to give the Swarm a second chance.

"Get everyone to the truck," Del told her. "Load 'em in. I'll find Marcus."

"You're not going out there alone," she said, and found she meant it. Nodding, Del turned to two other Gears who had followed him up from the rear of the caravan.

"Rustad, Lovings?"

"Sir?" the larger of the two answered.

"First truck's down. If we distribute everyone among the rest, we can get moving again. See to it while we find—"

"No can do," the big Gear said. He was huge, larger even than Cole. Lovings, his armor named him.

"Why not?"

"Rear truck's gone."

"Gone?!"

The man winced and nodded. His companion, Rustad, spoke up.

"Pouncer's quilled it. Tires, engine, everything. It's not going anywhere."

"How many injured?"

Rustad lifted her shoulders. "None."

"They're going after the trucks," Kait whispered. At that instant, Marcus Fenix strode out of the haze. He flicked his Lancer casually toward the dirt,

sending a spray of gore in a neat arc.

"Really getting tired of these assholes," he growled.

"We're down two trucks," Del told him, before anyone else could speak.

"Thanks for letting me know, but you two are in charge here." In the near distance, whoops and shouts of victory went up along the caravan. Kait opened her mouth to shout them quiet, to tell them this was far from over, when she realized they had it right.

The sounds of the Swarm had faded.

"That's weird," Del said.

"Definitely weird," she agreed, "but it's an opportunity and we need to take it." At Del's nod, she continued. "Get everyone from the rear truck and spread them among the other vehicles. There's no room for all of us, though —the Minotaurs aren't built for this many. Those of us from the lead truck will have to stay here and wait for evac."

"Now hold on…" Del said.

"Is there another way?" she demanded.

Del cast about, thinking, perhaps hoping to spot two functioning Minotaurs conveniently parked at the side of the road. There was nothing, though. Just dust and the growing stench of death.

"Kait's right," he said finally. Then he glanced at Rustad and Lovings, jerking his chin toward the functioning trucks behind them. It was all the orders they needed. The two Gears nodded and jogged off into the haze, already barking commands to the others.

The shift in strategy took only ten minutes to implement. Kait stood in the road, Del at her left and Marcus at her right, watching the three other Minotaurs drive off into the darkness. When she turned away, Salvador was behind her, with twelve villagers he'd chosen to stay behind and wait for evac.

"Let me guess," Kait said to him. "You're thinking, 'Wow, if this is the kind of protection the COG can offer, we might as well slit our own throats now and be done with it.' That about right? Go ahead, say it."

Sal shook his head.

"You were right, Kait."

"Excuse me?"

He gestured around them. "About the Swarm."

Kait waited.

Sal added, "We're ten miles from the village. If they'd found us there, instead, there wouldn't be a single one of us left." The man's gaze expanded to include Del and Marcus. "This fight could have been a bloodbath, too, but as things stand, all but one of our people are still alive and kicking."

"Sorry for your loss," she said.

Sal eyed her, gravely. "You, maybe better than any of us, know the risks we take living as Outsiders. It's a tragedy, no doubt, but a much bigger catastrophe has been averted, and for that, you have my thanks."

"We're not out of the woods yet," Marcus said.

"True," Sal replied. "But we've seen one more sunset than we otherwise would have."

Kait hoped he was right.

* * *

When Sal suggested they camp under the open sky, Kait felt a strong desire to agree, if only for the nostalgia. But Del insisted they make use of the Minotaurs' armor.

"Only one of them is upright, though," Kait said.

"So, let's do something about it."

No one complained when she gathered them all to help push the lead Minotaur back onto its wheels. Other than the destroyed radiator and the broken window, the truck had fared surprisingly well.

About a hundred yards back, the rear vehicle was in far worse shape. Quills poked out of every tire, fuel leaked from holes in its tank, and there were gashes along its canvas-covered rear section. An explosion—probably from a poorly thrown grenade—had torn the front axle off its mounts, too, but the cab was intact, as were the armored sides of the cargo area.

Just now, that was all that mattered.

They divided into two groups. Marcus took the rear truck; Kait, Del, and Salvador Pasco went to the front one. The twelve Outsiders were divided between them. Kait took first watch, sitting atop the cab. Now that the dust had settled, she could see the second truck. Marcus was seated atop its roof, and lifted a hand when she did.

A freezing cold wind came up from the south, blustering along the road and sending eddies of dust off into the flat expanse that surrounded them. Kait wondered why Sal had put his village in such a bleak place, and resolved to ask him in the morning. For a man who'd spent most of his life surviving off the forest, this seemed almost like a self-imposed punishment. Or a challenge.

He'd made it work, though, she had to give him that.

* * *

Her watch ended without incident. Four hours of sitting in the icy wind, a jacket wrapped about her head and jaw, eyes covered by goggles. By the time Del finally popped up through the hatch to take over, she'd become stiff and had to work to extricate herself from her position.

"Anything?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"G'night then."

Yawning, she nodded and went below.

Sal was in the driver's seat, one cheek pressed against the armored door, snoring softly. She took the passenger seat and drew her knees up to her chest. For a time she just stared out through the small, filthy front window, willing sleep to come. But sleep was an asshole, she'd come to think, and refused to arrive. She'd have to try if she wanted to get there, and knew her only real reward for the effort would be the nightmares.

Funny, she thought, how up on the roof when she'd absolutely had to stay awake, she'd found herself constantly nodding off on the verge of true rest. Now, when she could afford to get some shuteye, she could barely even will her eyes to close.

In desperate need of distraction, Kait switched on a flashlight and fished a satchel from behind the passenger seat. She wasn't sure why she'd brought it—force of habit, she supposed. She'd write a report for Jinn, she decided. It held a lot of appeal, the idea of walking into her office after this and just slapping down a folder.

"It's all in the report," she'd say, and stride out, evoking a "you don't own me" saunter. The thought made her grin.

She hadn't opened her personal bag since they'd left, and though the binder she'd brought was still in there, along with several pens, she was surprised to see another folder she hadn't packed. It was blue, and when Kait pulled it free of the leather satchel she read the words printed across the cover.

COALITION OF ORDERED GOVERNMENTS
DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY—
PERSONNEL REPORT

184729-H55R9-LM (DIAZ, GABRIEL)

And then, stamped below:

TOP SECRET
EYES ONLY

Kait swallowed. Her fingers trembled slightly. What the hell was this? And why was it marked secret? Then she saw the yellow square stuck to the lower right corner. She read it aloud, whispering.

"Knowledge is the best weapon. Read up. H."

H?

Hoffman. Had to be. Kait glanced back out the window, her eyes unfocused. She wondered what rules—no, what *laws*—she'd break by opening this. What kind of trouble Hoffman would be in if anyone found out. He was pushing ninety, though, so perhaps he didn't really give a shit.

She could see him now, wandering around the basement of Government House, making friends with the staff in Records. Making himself a fixture. Becoming someone that no one need bother paying attention to. The man knew his craft. Getting a file out would have been child's play for him.

Kait broke her gaze away from the tortured road ahead of her, shifting her focus instead to the past.

She opened the folder, and started reading.

Right away she knew something was very, very wrong.

ACT 2

LESSER ISLANDS
79TH YEAR OF THE PENDULUM WARS

1: NO EIGHTY

Lieutenant Colonel Gabriel Diaz broke into a sprint. Sand under his toes, the sun just peeking above the eastern horizon, he counted off the seconds as he raced toward the sign.

It had been planted in the sand and surrounded with barbed wire, and it faced away from him. On the far side was a pictographic warning to the civilian population telling them they were entering a restricted area. Land mines and death! Keep out! All bullshit, but so far it had worked.

The sign was exactly five hundred yards out from the last bit of grass that marked the true edge of Vectes Naval Base. Gabe always sprinted this stretch, counting the seconds, trying to improve. For the last three weeks he'd barely shaved a second off his best, though, and yesterday he'd actually lost a second for the first time in… well, since arriving here a few months back.

He pushed. His lungs burned. The sign was ahead.

And then he was past it. Gabe swore. He'd lost two seconds, but at least this time it wasn't his fault. He'd been distracted. Because between yesterday and today someone had painted a message on the back of the metal sign:

NO 80

It was a message appearing all over the place, lately. Chanted in the canteen, written on mirrors or bathroom stalls, scrawled on the sides of patrol boats, or muttered over the comm as a greeting or even a goodbye. Gabe was already tired of it, but hadn't yet summoned the energy to crack down on those who were using it.

Truth was, he agreed in principal.

No Eighty. No eightieth year of war. The conflict had gone on way too long—only an idiot or a psychopath would argue against that. The problem was, none of the superpowers were going to give up. Not until they controlled the Imulsion. And the slogan didn't identify a specific outcome, just "no more war." Win, lose, draw? Were these meatheads suggesting the COG surrender on the last day of the seventy-ninth, or unleash one last epic offensive, just to accomplish the end of the conflict?

Perhaps, Gabe mused, all they would accomplish with this graffiti was to knock another second off his time.

Slowing to a jog, he got his breath back under control. The tide was in. Cool water splashed under his bare feet. The regular group of locals were here, fishing. They waved at him as he passed, and as always Gabe waved back.

He jogged another mile, until the sand became a rocky shore of teeming tide pools. Here he rested, studying the life forms that lived in the tiny temporary ponds.

The sun was over the horizon now. Another dawn in the Lesser Islands, another day at Vectes Naval Base. A reward posting, one Gabe was supposed to be grateful for.

Part of him was. Filling his lungs with the brisk, heavy ocean air, Gabe Diaz knew things could be much, much worse. He'd been there, after all. Fought in the mud and flame, been ordered to kill, and then later, ordered others to kill. They had, in great number. And many of them had died.

Victorious or not, the guilt he'd amassed with each Gear that perished under his orders weighed him down like a chain and anchor in the deep ocean. Which is why he'd been given a medal—for "showing tactical prowess in the face of overwhelming odds"—and a posting here in this backwater corner of Sera. His reward for winning a great battle, despite the losses that had come with it.

Gabe scanned the horizon, unable to keep from contrasting this tranquil place with the horrors he'd witnessed in the frigid steppe north of Meschov. Yes, there was that part of him that felt grateful. But there was another part, too. The one that felt time was slipping away from him. Time, and the war itself.

He turned around, toward Vectes, and did his morning run again in reverse.

By the time he saw the walls of the base, the sun was well above the horizon, eroding the morning's chilly salt breeze. The fishermen had gone, their work for the day already done. Gabe half-heartedly considered going into town and buying a fishing pole of his own. Setting up next to them some morning and learning about their lives.

He considered that as he passed the sign warning of explosives hidden in the sand. "NO80" had been painted on this side, too. He found his usual gap in the barbed wire and wove through, unconcerned if anyone saw him

do it. The passage wasn't exactly a secret, and anyway, there were no Union of Independent Republics personnel for a hundred miles to note the hole in the base's defense. The enemy stayed at their end of the island chain, way to the north, and the COG stayed at this end in the south. That was how it worked. For as long as Gabe had been stationed here, anyway. Perhaps neither side wanted to ruin a good thing. Reward posting, indeed.

The beach gave way to a solid wall. A narrow access stairwell had been built into the side, leading up to a walkway that ringed the entire base. Usually by the time he was halfway from the warning sign to the wall he could see at least one Gear on patrol. This time, though, no one was up there.

Gabe took the steps two at a time, ready to dress down whatever Gear had pulled wall duty this morning.

"But the Indies never come here! What's the point!?" He could hear some private saying it even now, after being accused of being lax in their duty.

"They don't come here," Gabe would reply, *"because they know we're ready and waiting."*

And they'd grumble and mutter their yessirs and fuck off up to the wall. Later they'd come find him in the mess. Buy him a drink, maybe indulge him in a round of Fractured Lands. That would make the whole thing worth it, Gabe thought. Fewer and fewer challengers played the game against him lately because it required more tactical thought than most here cared to exercise. For Gabe, it was as important as his morning jog.

At the top of the stairs he realized he'd been wrong. It wasn't that there was no one on patrol, it was that they were all down at the seawall on the southern edge. Four Gears stood down there, all facing the ocean, each with an arm up to fight off the rhythmic spray of saltwater that crashed against that barrier. They were looking at something in the ocean.

Gabe jogged up behind them, slowing as he arrived.

There was no need to ask what had captured their collective attention, or why it merited ignoring the rest of the perimeter. Half a mile out to sea a ship was at anchor. Gray and sleek, definitely COG, but not a type Gabe had seen before. Not in person, anyway. The vessel was low slung, built for speed.

"Bus?" one of the men beside him said, a slang term for the Landing Craft, or LCU, class of ship.

"That's my guess," another replied, "but I'm no fish-head."

Gabe found he agreed with the guess, but waited to see all the same. The ship was in profile, and had no markings at all. No name, no number, not even a COG flag above its conning tower, but there was something about its lines that implied Landing Craft class. Maybe not of the utility variety, but the purpose seemed the same.

"Starting to get a bad feeling about this," he said, despite himself. The Gears beside him turned. They hadn't noticed him arrive, and at the sight of

their commanding officer they suddenly found other things to do. Like, for example, their duty.

"Lieutenant Colonel," they said in turn, as they went back to their patrol routes. Routes that seemed to suddenly require a very slow and careful trek along the southern sea wall, with full attention on the ship anchored out there. Gabe started to doubt his initial guess. The vessel seemed too small.

After a few minutes, the bow of the mystery ship rotated open, splashing into the water.

So, an LCU after all. Not going to be many tanks that could fit in that hold, though, and even if they could, they wouldn't deploy a half-mile out. So what were they landing from it?

The answer came immediately. As the forward ramp touched the waves, several small inflatable craft powered out from the mothership and turned toward shore. They came in fast, each carrying a full complement of six Gears. There was a moment, though brief, where Gabe had a flash of panic that this was some kind of UIR trick. One of their own boats disguised as an LCU, delivering squads wearing stolen COG armor. A dawn raid that would mark the day the Lesser Islands north of Tyrus were finally thrust into the war.

But it wasn't that. He knew with certainty because—as the boats approached the narrow harbor entrance—Gabe Diaz recognized the man sitting front and center in the first craft.

"Well, shit," he muttered into the breeze. Suddenly the lack of markings made sense. "This'll be interesting." Quickly he clomped down the inner set of stairs, heading toward the shipyard.

"LC," a Gear said as he passed. There were more, and the greeting was repeated by each of them in turn. Gabe responded with their ranks, despite knowing all their names. Names were for personal connection, or the need to get someone's attention. Using a name meant showing you cared, that you were deadly serious, or both, and that was a resource to be spent wisely.

He only used it for those who'd earned it. And if there were ever any combat on these shores, he'd use their names then, too.

"Diaz!"

The bark of his boss. Gabe winced slightly and turned.

"Captain," he said. "We have visitors. Four inflatables—"

"I'm well aware," the stout woman replied. She marched over and looked him up and down. Though Captain Phillips knew of his morning routine, she had no compunction about pretending his lack of uniform was an issue, at least when she needed it to be.

Their relationship was complicated.

She was COG Navy, not Army, for one thing. The overall commander of Vectes Base. Gabe, being Army, was responsible for all the Gears stationed here, and answered only to her. But he also answered to the Army, whose views and priorities didn't always line up with the Naval side of the

Coalition. Compounding the problem, Phillips was new here—only a few months in the Islands, barely more than him. As her first stint in command, so far she'd been quite keen to prove Vectes was a Naval installation first, and the Gears were merely guests. But more than that, she also seemed hell-bent on keeping the place quiet and, as a result, off the radar of their leadership.

Gabe opened his mouth, but was quickly cut off.

"Who they are and why they're here is none of your goddamn business," she said. He hadn't asked, but decided not to point that out. Asking had, after all, been exactly what he was about to do.

Phillips went on. "Get down there and make sure they have whatever supplies they need. Don't ask them questions. Don't even fucking look at them unless you have to. Get 'em their stuff, and get 'em out of here A-SAP. Clear?"

"Clear, ma'am."

"Good." She nodded. "Dismissed."

Gabe saluted and marched off, weaving through the barracks and the maze of cargo containers that stood just beyond. All the evidence was in place now, he thought. As if the unmarked boat, or the sight of Wyatt, hadn't been enough, the demand of cooperation and discretion sealed it.

A spec-ops team had just landed at Vectes.

* * *

"Ho-lee-shiiiit. Gabriel Fucking Diaz, as I live and breathe."

"The hell are you doing here, Wyatt?" He embraced his younger brother for the first time in…

"How long has it been?"

"Three years, I think," Wyatt replied. "Wait, shit, that was Oscar I saw then. Four years!"

"Four? Damn. Too long, brother." He realized suddenly that both the spec-ops squad and his own people were all standing around, waiting for the love-in to end so they could get to work.

"Forget my question, by the way," Gabe said. "Not supposed to ask what you're doing here."

Wyatt shrugged. "Doesn't bother me. It's no secret. We're here to do a bit of this and a bit of that." The Ghosts behind him all laughed, practically in unison, at the no-doubt familiar line.

Wyatt turned to them and hiked a thumb toward Gabe. "This is my brother. Won a big battle so they sent him here to drink rum on the beach."

"Must be nice," one of the Ghosts quipped.

Gabe ignored all this. He wanted to ask his brother a load of other questions. Like what he'd been up to since they'd last seen each other, or more to the point, how Wyatt had got mixed up in Special Forces. But he

had his orders, and Wyatt surely did, too.

"Cap said you need some supplies."

In answer, Wyatt snapped his fingers. A woman behind him slapped a laminated piece of paper into his hand. Wyatt in turn handed it to Gabe.

"Just a few things, then we'll be out of your hair."

"Guess we'll have to catch up another time," Gabe said, scanning the list. Rations, fuel, ammo. The usual stuff. Except for the last two items.

"Yellow paint… and… you're taking all our beer?"

Instantly the Vectes regulars at Gabe's back started to grumble.

"No, 'course not," Wyatt said. "Read it literally. We just need the kegs. Doesn't say they need to have anything in them."

"I don't understand."

"And you can't ask for an explanation. So it goes, eh, bro?"

Gabe grunted, his brain kicking into overdrive. True, he couldn't ask questions, but the need for kegs was going to be an issue. The latest shipment had just arrived. Emptying them sounded fun and all, but the sun had barely come up. Last thing he needed was a bunch of sauced-up enlisted stumbling around all day. Then he tried to imagine what a spec-ops team needed with twenty empty beer kegs. Nothing leapt to mind.

"Problem?" Wyatt asked.

Gabe motioned for his brother to join him off to the side. They walked fifteen feet from the others and turned their backs slightly.

"Were it anyone else asking, I'd just follow my orders and give you what you need, but… Wyatt, c'mon, all our kegs? Emptied or full, doesn't matter. I'll have a riot."

"We can help you quell a riot." That grin that Gabe knew so well crept onto the younger man's face. He'd seen it a hundred times. It usually led to Gabe and Oscar having to step in and save Wyatt from yet another scrape.

"You know, I'd hoped you'd mature a little once you reached adulthood," Gabe said. "*If* you reached adulthood, that is."

The man shrugged. "Never asked for you and Oscar to take me under your wings."

"You would have died if we hadn't."

"True," Wyatt admitted. "I'm grateful for that. Seriously, I am. But the fact remains…"

Gabe looked at the man beside him. No matter how hard he tried, he still saw him as the scrawny, sickly, awkward boy who was in the process of being kicked to death when Oscar and Gabe had stepped in and chased off the gang of idiots picking on the weakling. That had been their first day at the orphanage, and the boy called Wyatt rarely left Oscar's or Gabe's side in the years that followed. They came to think of him as their little brother. For better or worse.

"Felt like all Oscar and I did at Mercy School was watch your back."

"And look at me now," Wyatt said, spreading his arms. "All grown up."

"Physically, anyway."

At that Wyatt just grinned. "Your clearance level means I can't share details, but I'm pretty sure it's me protecting you now, brother."

Gabe shook his head. The arrogance of Ghost Squad was legendary, and only made worse by the fact that they'd earned it.

"Look, about your list… you said you just need the kegs, not the beer."

"Correct."

"Would something else do in their place? I can't ask what you need them for, but what about… hmm… we've got a palette of air tanks left from a year back. The dry dock pump failed, so for about three months the fish-heads had to dive to fix scrapes on the hulls. Now they're just collecting dust. The tanks, not the sailors."

Wyatt rubbed his chin, deep in thought. Finally he glanced up.

"Show me."

* * *

An hour later the four landing craft began making trips back and forth to the LCU, taking loads of the old unused diving tanks, along with the rest of the supplies the Ghosts had requested. When the tedium of loading began, Gabe ordered those of his men who had duty to get to it. The spectators drifted off soon after. Show over.

It was only when the last boat was loaded, and Wyatt came over to say goodbye, that Captain Phillips strode up and took in the scene.

"Get everything you need?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am," Wyatt replied.

"Good. I want you to relay a message to your captain for me."

"Comms down?"

"No, comms are fine, thank you very much. I need something impressed upon him, and that means someone needs to say it to his face."

"Fair enough." There was that grin again.

Phillips stepped up to the young man and stared up into his eyes for a moment. She was as stocky as they came. Twice as wide as Wyatt and all of it was muscle. A cast-iron wall of a woman. Yet there was something about the way Wyatt held himself that made Gabe wonder which of them would win in a scrape. The boy Gabe had first saved in that orphanage bathroom had been as useless as a sack of hammers, but you didn't survive a childhood like that without learning *how* to survive, and Gabe and Oscar had taught him plenty. The rest had been sheer willpower and—if Gabe was totally honest—a penchant for deviousness that rivaled anyone.

"Do you find something funny?" Captain Phillips asked. Under any other circumstances she would have tacked a rank onto that, just to show it was lower than hers, but none of the Ghosts' armor had ranks displayed, or names for that matter.

"No ma'am," he replied, looking into the middle distance instead of her face, which was only inches away.

"Good. Now here's the message."

Please don't take out a notepad and pen, Gabe thought, willing the advice to reach his brother through sheer mental force.

Wyatt stood still. Waiting. Playing the game.

Good.

"Nothing interesting ever happens in these islands," Phillips said, "and I like it that way. We have our base, the Gorasni have theirs. All the rocks in between are just that. Rocks. Useless rocks."

"I—"

She stepped on his interruption with all the considerable force her rank and stature allowed.

"*Useless* is good, Ghost. Useless is better than a mountain of body bags. Do you understand?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Good. Doesn't matter if you understand, though. Impress it upon Captain Deevers."

"I will."

"Then you're dismissed."

Wyatt saluted. It was, Gabe thought, the perfect salute to give someone you didn't think deserved it. Just an inch on the respectful side so as not to be called out on it, and nothing more.

The conversation over, Wyatt turned on his heel. In the process he met Gabe's eyes. It was only the briefest of instants, but Gabe had known Wyatt through the toughest years of their lives, and had a deep knowledge of all the looks the man could give and what they meant.

This look? It meant trouble.

Phillips nodded, then turned on her heel, matching Wyatt's exit with one of her own.

Gabe caught up with Wyatt as he was climbing aboard his craft.

"She's serious, by the way," Gabe said.

"I could tell." Wyatt winked at him.

"It… It's good to see you, Wyatt."

"'Course it is." His grin matched the tone.

Gabe lowered his voice. "I'm serious, brother."

At that Wyatt swung his legs back over the side of the boat and approached. He clasped hands with Gabe, then pulled him into a soldier's embrace.

"I know you are," Wyatt said. "It's good to see you, too. I wish Oscar was here. Family reunion, eh?"

"We should arrange that," Gabe replied. "After… well, *after*."

Wyatt's grin faltered a bit. "One day at a time, eh? But if the stars align and that reunion can happen, first round's on me."

"Holding you to that."

Wyatt saluted. A much less formal version than that he'd given Phillips. Then he was back aboard his boat, and the motor revved.

Gabe watched his brother speed off back to his ship. After a while he realized that Phillips was standing beside him, doing the same thing. When the rafts were all back in the mothership, and the ramp retracted, she turned to him.

"I got the sense," she said, "that you know that little prick."

Gabe nodded. "Wyatt Callahan. We grew up together."

"I could look him up, but we both know the file will be restricted. What can you tell me about him?"

"He's a good man at heart," Gabe said carefully. "Unfortunately, that heart is buried under a lifetime of shit." *Sprinkled here and there with the best advice and support Oscar and I could give, but I know it wasn't enough*. He left this unsaid.

"Should I be worried?"

A loaded question, and one Gabe wasn't sure how to answer. He'd only worked with her for a few months, and their relationship was still as rocky as the eastern shore. Gabe was used to giving advice and having it listened to, usually followed. But Phillips seemed to think that discarding his advice —or just not asking for it at all—was the right way to establish the proper pecking order. Navy first, in her base.

"Worried? I don't think so," he said. Then he added, "But today might be a good day for a readiness drill." To her credit, she pondered that. Then she turned and looked at the LCU out at sea.

"They could have come a lot closer," she said, almost to herself. "A bus like that… could have come right up to shore."

He remained silent. The reason they'd anchored so far out was obvious. Whatever else they had in their hold, it wasn't for prying eyes. After a few seconds she turned and marched back to her office.

Ten minutes later, the announcement went out for a readiness drill.

2: CALM WATERS AND CHOPPY SEAS

At 9AM sharp, Gabe walked down to the shipyard and out onto dock number one.

The Gears under his command stood at attention, in a neat line along the old wooden planks of the dock. Opposite them, on the side where the boats were moored, the sailors stood. Three per boat. Pilot, navigator, engineer. Technically they answered to Phillips, not him, but since being promoted Gabe had earned their trust and respect. He couldn't remember the last time any of them had asked Phillips before following one of his orders.

There were sixteen patrol boats in all. They gleamed in the morning sun.

The Gears stood in full combat loadout. They were a pool from which to be drawn. When a patrol went out, a minimum of two Gears would accompany the sailors. Two was the norm around here, with so little activity on dry ground. A full squad of six could be deployed, though, and in a pinch as many as ten warriors could crowd in.

One hundred and sixty Gears lined the dock.

Gabe walked down the line of soldiers first, inspecting their kit as much as the look in their eyes. "Vacant stare" was what he drilled, and vacant stares were what he saw. As for the kit, things weren't quite as satisfactory.

"Private Howe!"

"Sir!"

"Break that Lancer down and clean it again. I can see grit from here."

"Sir!"

The man stepped out of the line and run-marched back to the armory.

"Corporal Davis!"

"Sir!"

"Is that a standard scope on that Longshot?"

"No, sir!"

"Well what the hell is it, then?"

"Sir, the scope is from a Pesanga boar rifle. Traded for it when I was—"

"Is it better than ours?"

"Sir, yessir! Their optics are—"

"As you were, soldier."

The woman clapped her jaw shut.

"Adapt and improvise," Gabe said. "Well done, Davis. Just clear it with me next time, please."

She smiled, slightly. The smile vanished when Gabe threw an extra glare her way. It was a fine line, he knew. Most of his fellow lieutenants were all about regs. Everything by the book, the COG way was the only way, the COG way was best. Army before Navy. That sort of thing.

Gabe Diaz didn't hate many things, but blind obedience bugged him. There were always other ways to do things. Creative ways to solve problems. It was all in one's mindset. Thinking not just about results, but of consequences, what to do about them, and the consequences of those actions, too. Initiative and critical thought were as essential as a properly cleaned and oiled Lancer, in his book.

On the line of one hundred and sixty Gears, he counted six with fresh "*NO80*" tattoos. Several more had actually used a torch to emblazon the slogan on their armor. It was time, Gabe thought, to address the phenomenon directly.

"Private Abbot!" Gabe shouted at the sixth tattoo wearer. The man was near the end of the row, and stiffened at his name being called out.

"Sir!"

"Explain that."

"It's a tattoo, sir."

"No shit, Private. What does it mean?"

The man's posture shifted, suddenly nervous. "I'm sure the LC knows. Sir."

"I'm asking you."

"No eighty. No eightieth year of war."

"An end to the war?"

"Yessir."

"This year?"

The man nodded.

"And those of you wearing this, are you aware of some victory plan? Something that I'm not? A final push? A great offensive?"

No one spoke.

"Perhaps you plan to surrender on New Year's Eve, then?"

They grew shifty. The silence remained.

Gabe stood there, staring at them, knowing that Phillips would be watching this from her office. He had to play this right, and wished now he

had just ignored it. Phillips hadn't told him to put an end to the slogan, after all, but he thought it was probably a test, considering she'd said nothing about it as of yet.

"This war, between the Coalition and the UIR," he said, in his lowest tone that would still carry up the dock, "will end when people way above our pay grade decide it will end. This year, next, or ten more down the road. That's not our decision. They make the strategy. We carry it out."

Silence reigned on the line, but something else, too. A tension in the air. That barest hint of defiance or, perhaps, disobedience.

"We all want the war to end, Abbot, but it's strategy that's going to win it. That and all of us, doing our part to the best of our ability. It's most definitely *not* an arbitrary timeframe chosen because it makes for a good tattoo. Am I understood?"

"Sir!"

"So I'm going to work under the assumption," Gabe went on, "that when I see 'no eighty' on your arms and armor, painted on walls and hulls and signs, that what you're telling me is that you're going to kick so much UIR ass in the next six months that the Indies'll surrender out of sheer exhaustion."

They knew this tone, and what it prompted. A chant erupted from the line, all bellowing the single syllable in unison.

"HOO!"

"Good. Gears, dismissed."

The Gears turned and marched off back to their duties. Gabe turned to the sailors, then, and repeated the process. Their half of the dock included the boats, though, and inspecting all of them took the better part of the afternoon. Whatever reservations they might have held about having someone outside the Navy inspect their boats had vanished a long time ago. Gabe had made sure of it, mainly by studying. He knew as much about their boats and procedures as any Naval officer, and with that knowledge he'd earned a grudging respect.

By the time he reached the last boat, the sun was already kissing the horizon. Gabe was invited, as was tradition, then stepped aboard and started with the engines. He'd already noticed that there was oil in the water beneath this craft, and the smell of it was everywhere. When the engineer lifted the hatch to access the engines, it hit them all like a fist.

"Call me crazy, sailor, but I think we've got a leak here."

"Negative, sir."

Gabe glanced at the woman, ready to argue, but there was a calm in her face that gave him pause. She radiated confidence.

"Care to explain, Petty Officer Gian?"

"This is the CNV *Righteous*, sir." She gestured to the twin engines below the deck hatch. Gabe knew the name. The boat had arrived from Merrenat a few weeks before, part of a program to test out changes and improvements

to the old, trustworthy ship platform.

The engine bay was filthy. Amber liquid, burned black in places, covered nearly every surface. Some of those surfaces weren't present on the rest of the fleet.

"They've added turbos," he said, more to himself than Gian.

"Correct. Fifty percent improvement in raw power, once they're spooled up."

He nodded, impressed in spite of himself. "I'll take your word for it, but that still looks like a leak to me."

"No, sir," she said. "The wrenches from Merrenat tell me that's 'expected venting of excess lubricant that results from prolonged use of…' Etcetera, etcetera."

Gabe frowned. "So we have fifty percent more power, but can't use it without leaving a nice slick trail for the enemy to follow."

"Plus it's stinking up our docks," Gian added.

"That, too." Gabe swatted a bug behind his ear, not quick enough to avoid a bite though. "Well, give them whatever data they need, and call a leak a leak, will you? I'll amend it with my feelings on the matter. Which is to say, I think it's total bullshit in its current state. Useless."

"Yessir!"

"In the meantime, run the *Righteous* at a lower power to prevent this excess venting."

"Um," Gian said. "That's not possible, sir."

"Pardon?"

"Design flaw, I think." She gestured to the engine bay. "The turbos take up so much room that the engine is no longer sufficiently cooled, even when normally aspirated. We're getting this, uh, expected venting, no matter how hard we push her."

"You'd think those idiots would have noticed it before they sent her to us."

"They did notice," she said.

"Oh, did they?" he responded. "And what was their advice on the issue?"

She shrugged. "They said they only do engines. Venting and airflow design is run from a team at—"

"'Not our problem,' in other words."

"Essentially."

"Right. I'll talk to Phillips, see if we can't sort it out. Thank you, Gian."

"What do you want us to do in the meantime?" It was the ship's pilot, Mendez, who'd been standing silently behind them the whole time. He looked out of his element. Gabe studied the engine for a moment longer, then looked at the two of them in turn.

"Anything preventing us from tinkering a bit?"

Gian smiled. Mendez frowned, clearly not pleased with having to deal

with all this untested equipment, and clearly aware that "tinkering" was unlikely to make his life any easier.

"Right," Gabe said. "Here's what I want you to do. Go over to the armory, and—"

"Armory's under renovation," Mendez said. "Sir," he added as an afterthought.

"I'm well aware of that, sailor. Go over there and talk to the foreman. See if we can 'borrow' two sections of metal grid plating. They're adding a second story and a catwalk over the warehouse floor, so they should have plenty."

"Catwalk?"

"Yes, exactly." He pointed at the deck hatch that covered the engine bay. "We'll weld the mesh plates together and replace that hatch with it."

"Allowing the excess heat to vent," Gian said. "Very good, sir."

"Thank you."

"Except for all the seawater that will get in there if we're in choppy seas," she added. He stared at her for a moment, impressed by her forwardness. The military could use more of that, he thought.

"Mendez," Gabe said, "when was the last time you had choppy seas in the Lesser Islands?"

"Calmest waters on Sera, sir," the man said, though he still sounded dubious. "Long as you stay clear of the north-facing sandbars."

"See, Gian? Besides, I'm sure the fine wrenches over at Merrenat want us to test her effectiveness under a flooded-engine-bay scenario."

"It is on the list," Gian agreed, coming around to the idea.

"Then do it."

No one argued this time. Gabe finished inspecting the ship, noticing several new pieces of navigation gear as well, but decided he'd given them enough to think about for one day.

By the time he left, Gian was already dismantling the hinges on the deck hatch, her face marred by a smear of grease.

* * *

The next morning Gabe repeated his running routine. Out past the razor wire, run along the beach, greet the fishermen and long for the simplicity of their lives, then back to the base and his duty.

When he reached the wall, it was not a patrolling Gear waiting for him, but Captain Phillips.

She eyed him from the top of the stairs, hands clasped behind her back. As Gabe came up the steps he realized he'd never seen the expression she currently wore. There was a moment, when he came to a stop and held up a hand to catch his breath, that he thought she was going to tell him the war had ended. That the noeighties had got their wish.

"About time you came back," Phillips said.

"What's happened?"

"That goddamn Ghost team ran into trouble, and now they need evac."

Wyatt… Gabe tried to keep his immediate emotions in check. There were plenty of Gears out there, not just the one he'd grown up with.

The Captain turned and walked. Gabe fell in beside her.

"Call came in twenty minutes ago," she said. "Fucking morons. Coming here and screwing up our stalemate."

"What happened?" he repeated, forcing more authority into his voice, despite being outranked.

Phillips took a deep breath. "That is currently unclear," she said. "All we know is they're at Knifespire."

"Knifespire? Why?"

"Classified," she spat. "But that's where they are, so that's where you're going."

Gabe tried to picture the place. In an island chain of unimportant rocks, Knifespire had to be at the bottom of the barrel. It was small, for starters, and the westernmost island in the chain, a full mile away from the next closest piece of land. It had a rocky shore, save for maybe one or two small coves—he couldn't really remember, never having had reason to study it. The unforgiving shore gave way to a long and narrow span of rocky terrain called Gatka Ridge, which ended in the island's namesake, Knifespire. A nearly vertical spar of volcanic rock that rose four hundred feet almost straight up, ending in a sharp tip that resembled a dagger.

It was an unforgiving place. Other than the jungle around Gatka Ridge, nothing much grew there. So what the hell was Special Forces' interest in it?

Nothing good, Gabe imagined.

And now they were in trouble. Which meant…

"Was the UIR already there?" he asked, leaving the implication unvoiced. If they were, it meant the COG had missed something. That the island wasn't so useless after all. That meant someone screwed up. Possibly Gabe, if a patrol had failed to spot Gorasni activity.

Phillips wheeled on him. "Did you miss the part where I said we don't know anything? I'll repeat myself if I have to."

"No, ma'am."

"Good." She poked him in the chest with one damned strong finger. "They called for evac, then went silent. That's all we have to go on. So get out there and bring them home."

"Yes, ma'am."

"I want to make it clear, Diaz, that if we lose a spec-ops team, Vectes is going to be crawling with Ghosts by this time next week, and Hoffman will be with them. That's the last thing I need." She didn't wait for an affirmative this time. She simply turned on her heel and stormed away.

Gabe frowned inwardly, watching her go. He wondered if he'd ever have

a commanding officer who was looking out for something other than their own career.

"No wonder the pendulum still swings," he muttered.

* * *

He went to the offices for the local Naval Reconnaissance squad first, saluting the staff as he entered. His was a face they'd quickly become accustomed to seeing. Gabe made for the charts room, flipping through the huge papers on the table until he found the one that included Knifespire.

The map was the same one he'd seen several times before. What interested him now was a filing index written in the corner. Gabe memorized it, then went to the cabinets on the wall and ran his index finger along the dozens of drawers until he found the one he wanted.

Knifespire's folder was thin, but it contained what he needed. The latest notes Recon had made in their tireless observations of the whole theater. Short on time, Gabe scanned the most recent report, logged three days ago, looking for anything interesting.

"Damn," he said. The effort seemed a waste of time, as all of the entries were marked with a simple NNR—nothing new to report.

As he closed the folder he noticed one marking, however. Not on Knifespire itself, but the ocean west of it. Gabe studied the comment, and the location, then snapped the folder closed. The tidbit of information might be nothing, but any knowledge was useful knowledge in his view.

He left, heading for the barracks.

As he pushed inside, he winced.

It was like any other morning, of course, but he'd hoped after yesterday's drill that there'd be a bit more wind in everyone's sails. Gears and sailors alike were in various states of dress, readiness, even consciousness. Only a few had their uniforms on and were in the process of heading out for duty.

"LC on deck!" someone shouted. The transformation was instant, and made him proud. Within seconds the disarray had all but vanished, resulting in two neat lines of men and women on either side of the room, all eyes forward, staring at nothing. Gabe didn't bother with preliminaries or speeches. They were on the clock now.

"Mendez, Carter, Finn."

The three sailors glanced his way.

"I want your boats ready to leave in five minutes. Not a drill. Go, and hop to."

They stepped out of line, along with their assigned navigators and engineers. The nine sailors rushed past Gabe, no further instructions needed.

"Gian," he said as the engineer passed him.

She stopped and turned, chin lifted in acknowledgment.

"She ready?"

"She's ready, sir, but not tested."

"Fair enough. Make me proud."

She nodded and left, sprinting now to catch up to her crewmates.

Gabe turned back to the others. "Blair?" A woman stepped forward, eyes still front. She was the best Gear under his command. Tough, smart, and capable of independent thought. "Get a squad together, whichever Gears have their armor on and their weapons prepped the quickest. Be on the dock in five."

"Sir!"

Gabe turned and left, crossing the yard to his own quarters as the sound of Gears filled the barracks behind him. They were competing to go on the op. He smiled, went inside his room, and pulled his own armor off its stand, determined to be there before any of them.

As he laced up his combat boots, Gabe found himself at eye-level with a framed photograph on his desk. Three boys stared back at him, ages thirteen, eleven, and eight, respectively. He and his brother Oscar were both smiling. Beside them was the scrawny form of Wyatt Callahan. He hadn't been smiling that day and Gabe couldn't remember why. The kid was always worried about trouble of one sort or another. Gabe thought that was probably still the case. The difference now was that Wyatt had figured out how to stay above it.

Or bury it.

Gabe hoped he'd get the chance to find out which.

3: SCABBARD COVE

"Knifespire?!" Mendez asked. He must have heard the incredulity in his own voice. Before Gabe could react, he added, "Knifespire, yessir." Then he nudged the navigator, who started pulling up charts.

"Get us in scope range first," Gabe ordered. "Need to see what we're up against before we charge in there."

"Are we expecting UIR?"

"Count on it."

They all looked at each other, but no one said anything. Other than the occasional exchange of fire between passing patrol boats, there hadn't been actual combat in months, much less a casualty. When Gabe looked at Blair she held his gaze, and nodded. Despite the ad hoc way they'd come together, her team would be ready.

Gabe got on the comm, ordering the other two boats to keep back and await instructions. Manned only with basic crews, they were ready to pick up the stranded Ghost team. That left them more vulnerable to an assault, though.

"Okay, Pilot, let's see what this boat can do."

Mendez glanced at Gian, who dipped her chin to signal her approval. With that, he yanked the throttle to three quarters, then maximum. The engines roared, all the more thunderous with the improvised mesh plating Gian had welded in place of the usual solid steel hatch.

A frothy white wake began to trail behind them, as low waves pounded the bow and sprayed up over the sides. Gabe put on his sunglasses to keep the saltwater from his eyes, then removed them as the spray rendered them useless. Stepping into the cabin instead, he stood behind the pilot and navigator, grabbing a handhold as the boat bounced off waves. Her speed continued to build to something damned impressive.

"Heat looks good!" Gian shouted over the roar.

Gabe nodded, then tapped Mendez on the shoulder. "Ease off a bit," he yelled in his ear. "Rather save it for the return leg."

"Understood!"

They raced along the shore of a low, tree-covered island called Adena. A fishing village whisked by, barely visible through the thick jungle. Gabe caught a glimpse of several natives standing along the tree line, half-hidden by ferns, all staring at the boat as it passed. He raised a hand to them, as he always did.

They ignored his gesture, as they always did.

Some minutes later the engine note lowered, and not long after that it vanished altogether. They were at the end of Adena Island, and open sea loomed ahead.

"There it is," Mendez said, as the roar of the engine was replaced by the gentle lapping of water against the hull of the patrol boat. Knifespire came into view. From this distance, all Gabe could make out was the steep tower of rock from which the place drew its name. Gatka Ridge and the rocky shore were hidden by a dull haze.

Yet even from this distance he could tell something was wrong. A plume of black smoke curled up into the bright blue sky. Gabe brought up his binoculars.

"Get me closer."

Mendez took the boat to quarter power, and pointed her toward the dark smear on the horizon. Standing at the bow rail, Gabe watched as the island slowly revealed itself. First the trees along the ridge, then the dark wall that was the eastern shore. The face looked impassable, though he noted several places along its mile-long length where scrubs and small trees clung to the surface, hinting at river outlets perhaps. Hidden coves, if they were lucky.

The lowest parts of Knifespire finally came into view.

"Fuck," he whispered.

Dead center in front of him was the source of the smoke, and it wasn't coming from the island. It was coming from the unmarked LCU. The ship was already half submerged, and sinking fast. No one was visible in the waters around it, but there was plenty of debris. Smoke obscured much of the immediate area. It was billowing out of the engine room, pushed horizontal by erratic ocean winds that seemed to converge here after being twisted by the sharp peak of the island.

Just visible behind the plume of smoke, he could see three of the four rafts Wyatt and his compatriots had used yesterday to move cargo. All were beached in a small cove. No sign of Wyatt, though, or any of the other Ghosts.

"What's that beach called?" he asked the navigator.

The man consulted his maps. "Scabbard Cove."

Gabe scanned along the island's length toward the north, then across the waters. About a half-mile from the northernmost edge, two fast-attack frigates sat at anchor under UIR flags. Their guns were trained, as far as Gabe could tell, on the quickly disappearing hull of the LCU.

"Mendez, take us south by southwest. We'll keep that smoke between us and them, and get to that beach. Once we reach it, have Carter and Finn follow us on the same course."

"Copy that."

"Gian?"

"Sir!"

"In hindsight, our little vented hatch there is going to leave a nice trail of smoke for the enemy to follow if we push those turbos past their breaking point. See to it that we don't."

"Understood."

"Blair, get your team ready. We're going ashore."

"You got it, LC."

"All except Davis."

Surprised, Blair glanced at him, then at the sniper, who was standing a few feet away and already opening her mouth to argue.

"Davis," Gabe said, "you're on the roof. Anyone comes out of those trees that's not one of ours, you drop them."

The woman glanced at Blair for confirmation. Not of the order itself, Gabe thought, but to make sure this was all really happening. Combat in the islands was rare to the point of being unheard of. Whatever Davis saw in Blair's expression, it was what she needed. She started to climb onto the roof of the pilot's cab. It would be just big enough, Gabe thought, for her to lie prone. Shooting from a boat at sea was a skill few snipers had, but he'd made sure all of the sharpshooters at Vectes trained for it.

The rest of the Gears aligned themselves along the edges of the patrol boat, ready to enter the waves at his command.

When they were three hundred yards from shore, the UIR frigates opened fire. A screeching shell sailed overhead, followed by a plume of water thirty feet high. A full second later they heard the delayed booming sound of the shots being fired.

"So much for the cover of smoke," Gabe said to himself. "Full power, Mendez!"

"Aye!"

The engines roared to life, as did the newly fitted turbos, adding a high-pitched wheeze to the deep note of the diesels. The boat sprang to life, riding up on the chop and leaving white spray in its wake. More artillery shells were launched by the two distant frigates, who'd fired that first salvo to get their sights in. They would soon lose their prey in the uneven shoreline of the island. It would take them a while to pull up anchor and come around to the eastern side, and by then Gabe intended to be long

gone.

Two more shells hit the water. This time both had the right range, but the wrong angle. Spouts of water erupted in the patrol boat's wake, twenty yards behind them.

"Their targeting solution is based on the old engine," Gian said, a satisfied grin creeping onto her features. Gabe nodded. It was true, and he'd counted on it. The question was, how long until they figured it out?

The next shot was closer, and the one after that was near enough to spray them all with water and set their ears ringing with the shockwave. But it was the last chance the frigate would have until it moved. The two UIR boats vanished behind Knifespire's jagged shore. The last glimpse Gabe had was of one of them coming about.

"We don't have much time," he said.

"And our two reserve craft, the empty ones, don't have those new turbos," Mendez observed.

"But the enemy doesn't know that."

"Good point, sir."

"Get them moving now," Gabe said. "West first, then come up from the south. Meet us at the tip."

The pilot didn't seem happy about it, but got on the comm all the same, repeating the plan to Carter and Finn, his counterparts in the other two craft.

That done, Mendez put his focus on guiding his boat into Scabbard Cove, which now dominated their view and grew larger by the second. The beach itself was only forty or fifty feet across, Gabe estimated, and there were hints of coral outcrops under the waves, but the navigator knew his stuff. He conferred in quiet, confident tones with Mendez as they raced toward the shoreline. The pilot kept the throttle at maximum the whole way, as Gian monitored the laboring engines, her face pinched with worry but, as of yet, no more than that.

At the last second Mendez turned them hard to port, sending up a massive spray of water. In the same instant he killed the engine. This was as close as they were going to get.

No one needed any further prompt. Blair leapt over the side, and each of her Gears followed. One after another they vaulted the guardrail, splashing into waist-high water. Soon they were wading toward shore, Lancers held above their heads.

As Gabe made to leap the railing, Davis's Longshot let out a crack of thunder from the roof of the cabin. The sound echoed through the trees, sending hundreds of birds up into the clear blue sky. Gabe didn't bother to look for her target. He hopped the railing and braced himself for the water below. It was always colder than he expected.

Today was no different.

The initial shock was the least of his concerns, though. Gunfire erupted

from the tree line.

Gabe scanned the beach and finally saw what he'd come to find. Six or seven of the Coalition Ghosts had taken cover behind a large piece of driftwood on the beach. The tree was an old palm, barely two feet high at its widest point, which meant the Gears had to lie prone just to get any protection from it. Even from a distance Gabe could see the trunk splintering under the hail of gunfire coming from the trees.

Davis fired again, and again, despite no visible UIR. She'd be aiming at their muzzle flashes, he thought, likely with only minimal effect. What she did accomplish, though, was a redirection of fire toward the patrol boat.

Mendez wasted no time reacting. As Gabe pushed through the waves he heard the engines come up again, and then the sound of the deck gun as the navigator, or Gian, began to hose down that tree line with machine-gun fire.

Blair and her Gears reached the fallen tree where the spec-ops team was pinned down, taking positions wherever they could, their Lancers resting on the trunk. They added to the barrage the *Righteous* was laying down.

Gabe came ashore last, spotted Wyatt among the survivors, and took a knee next to him.

"Thanks for coming," his brother said.

"Save it for later. Sit rep?!"

Wyatt grimaced. "Didn't think we'd get their attention at all, much less that fast."

"They were waiting here for you?"

"No," he admitted, then ducked reflexively as a bullet cracked into the trunk just inches from his head. "We landed, got about halfway through our op, and were coming back to the beach for more equipment when they fell on us."

"How many?"

"A whole platoon landed. We thinned them out, but there's a good fifteen or twenty left."

"Wounded?"

"None that I'm aware of."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Not sure about the others. We split up when the *Vigil* was hit." Meaning the LCU, Gabe realized.

"Comms?"

Wyatt hesitated. "We maintain silence in this kind of scenario."

"Well, fuck that," Gabe growled. "Raise the others and tell them to head to the southernmost tip. We've got two more boats coming in with room to carry them, but those frigates are going to make it complicated if we don't hurry."

Reluctantly, Wyatt nodded.

"The rest of you get ready to move!" he called out down the line. And he realized then that only his people were shooting. The Ghosts were all still

behind the log. Then he understood why.

"Share ammo, Blair!"

She nodded, gestured to her Gears. They started passing extra magazines to the Ghosts. Gabe handed a spare of his own to Wyatt.

"You want to take point?"

Wyatt looked at him, then nodded. It was a kindness to be offered the lead, helping him save face with his squad, and Gabe knew the look well. Wyatt slapped the mag into his Lancer. He took one more look over the log before, without a word, he raced off in a crouched run toward the southern edge of the beach. There was a spot where trees and rock converged, and Gabe thought he could just see the hint of a trail between the two.

The rest of Wyatt's squad followed in a staggered pattern, so that one was always covering their movement by watching the trees.

One of the men, halfway to the trail, fell face first into the sand. Gabe had seen that lifeless flop before, and knew instantly the man would never get back up. The last of Wyatt's Ghosts grabbed his fallen comrade by the collar and dragged him the rest of the way.

"Let's move," Gabe shouted to Blair.

She nodded. "Blue squad, with me!"

Their technique was different, all moving at once, turned sideways so that all could shoot at any threat that dared to poke out of the enemy position. They made it without any further losses, but at the cost of a lot of ammo.

"We need to get the hell out of here, and fast," Blair said when Gabe reached the trailhead. He clapped her on the shoulder.

"Wyatt, any word from your other squads?"

"Affirmative, they're headed to the rendezvous."

"Let's move then."

Wyatt seemed to hesitate, his eyes facing the other way. North. Gabe turned and followed his gaze. The dark, jagged peak of Knifespire jutted above the thin jungle, three-quarters of a mile away, at the far end of Gatka Ridge.

"I don't like that look, Wyatt."

The man ignored him for a few seconds, then finally broke from his reverie and turned south. Without a word, he was off, his squad following in their silent way.

Gabe looked at Blair. "Take point, I'll bring up the rear—"

An explosion shook the beach, just twenty yards away. Sand and dirt sprayed against Gabe's armor. Harmless, but that was going to change. The frigates were on the move, and finally had a view of the cove.

"GO!" Gabe roared.

Everyone ran. The trail was narrow, in places barely wide enough for one person. Vines covered the ground, half-obscured by dirt and fallen palm fronds, which were brittle as bone and made a hell of a noise when stepped

on. To Gabe's right was what felt like an impenetrable wall of jungle. On his left, a natural wall of jagged rock, about waist high at best, with crashing waves beyond and below, ten or twenty feet down.

The next shell from the lead frigate hit this wall of rock. The ground beneath Gabe's feet shook and his toe snagged on a vine. He went down, managed to turn it into an awkward roll, and came up running.

A great cracking sound rumbled up through the earth. Gabe glanced back and saw two things in quick succession. The trail behind him was starting to shift and crack. And UIR soldiers were on that trail, a hundred feet off, but closing. He met the eyes of the closest one, a tall man with deeply tanned skin and a clean-shaven head.

Gabe slowed and lifted his Lancer. The other man did the same with his Markza. Before either could shoot, though, the land between them suddenly collapsed. The shell from the frigate's deck gun had weakened the cliff. A section of rock wall fell away, and behind it a twenty-foot-wide and fifty-foot-long stretch of dirt and rubble poured into the ocean.

Gabe stumbled, backpedaling quickly to stable ground as the dirt beneath his boots slid in to fill the void left by the earthslide.

The UIR man—an officer, Gabe realized—had been closer to the collapsed section. He was on the ground, one leg over the edge of the newly formed ravine, and had lost his rifle.

Gabe lifted his Lancer and took aim. As he squeezed the trigger another artillery shell slammed into the gap between them, throwing up a huge gout of flame and earthen debris. He stumbled again, backward.

As he got to his feet he caught the gaze of the UIR officer. He was kneeling, facing away from Gabe but looking back over a shoulder that had a growing stain of blood seeping into his undershirt. Gabe considered firing again, but at that instant the jungle on the other side of the ravine exploded. He turned away, and ran.

Blair and the others were waiting for him a hundred feet down the trail, discussing whether or not they should go back for him when he finally emerged from the foliage.

"In the future, I vote going back for me," he said to their relieved expressions.

"Wasn't a question of *if*," Blair said. "Just *who*."

Gabe nodded, grateful, and then gestured for them to keep moving. They were a distance off the rocky seawall now, but soon the frigates were likely to grow impatient and just start shelling the whole area in hopes of a lucky shot.

They continued at a jog as the terrain became even more wild and treacherous. Eventually, though, they reached a scrape of flat land with almost no foliage at all. A natural clearing with a huge termite mound in the center, crawling with insects.

"Ocean," Blair said. "Through the trees on three sides. We're close."

She skirted the edge of the clearing, instinctively staying well away from the ten-foot-high hotel for bugs. Another stretch of trees quickly gave way to a narrow beach. Wyatt and his team were there, as were the three patrol boats. One had already been loaded with the missing second group of Ghosts.

Blair broke into a run, Blue Squad following suit. From the rear, Gabe twirled a hand above his head, telling Mendez and the other pilots to get moving.

Wyatt waited for Gabe.

"We left some equipment behind."

"Forget it." Gabe pushed the younger man toward a boat.

Wyatt seemed about to argue, but let it go.

"Hoffman will be pissed."

"Everyone's going to be pissed if we don't get out of here before those frigates spot us. Now *move*!"

Wyatt hesitated a moment longer, his gaze once again on the distant shard of rock that dominated the island.

"Take us west," Gabe told Mendez as soon as he was aboard.

"West is open ocean!"

"Trust me," Gabe snapped, turning and pushing binoculars to his face. Mendez didn't reply to the order, at least not verbally. Just a few seconds later they were underway, matching speed with the two companion boats and heading due west.

It was the first time Gabe had ever seen the western shore of Knifespire, and it was, in his estimation, the same as the eastern side, just with slightly more sand and slightly less rock, no doubt due to the constant pounding of the ocean waves.

"Slow a bit," Gabe said.

"Slow?!" Mendez asked incredulously. "Their guns—"

"We need them to follow. Stay just out of range."

Gabe, still looking through the binoculars, felt a presence at his left elbow.

"Sir," Mendez said in a low voice, "with all due respect, we're easy targets out here. We should be going southeast. Hug the shore of that fishing island."

"It's called Adena," the navigator said.

"Yeah, Adena. Hug the shore, then lose them in the chain."

"We could make it," Gabe agreed, "but the other two boats won't, not once those frigates get up to full speed."

"How's it any different out here, though?" The man's growing anger crept into his voice, and Gabe was forced to pull the binoculars from his eyes and glance at him. He saw the frustration there, and understood it. Following orders on incomplete information was a part of all their jobs, but that never made it easy. Gabe glanced at the navigator.

"Take a look at your chart, and what's in front of us."

Curious, Mendez joined his navigator at the chart table. Gabe went back to watching the enemy ships as they came into view and pursued.

"There's nothing in front of us," Mendez said.

"Not true," Gabe said. "I read Recon's latest report this morning. One of their scouts spotted a sandbar that isn't on the charts."

"A sandbar?" Mendez asked. "Really?"

Gabe handed him the binoculars. "See for yourself."

"Holy shit. I see it. Damn, had no idea."

"No reason to. No one comes out this way. My hope is that the UIR don't have it on their maps, either." The alternative, Gabe knew, was death. If Gorasni recon was as thorough as the COG's, the whole plan was futile. They'd just skirt the underwater hill and catch up to the three smaller boats, sinking them at their leisure.

The waves became taller with each passing second, and by the time they crossed over the sandbar the patrollers were bouncing off whitecaps and slamming into the troughs with brutal regularity. There was a flash from one of the frigates' guns. A spray of white water shot up into the air sixty or seventy feet astern.

"Going to be close," Blair said. She sounded as helpless as Gabe felt. Another blast cut that distance in half. The next was close enough to rock the boat and send them all crouching to the deck.

"C'mon, c'mon!"

A fourth blast had the right range, but missed to the left thanks to a sudden change in heading by Mendez. Gabe felt the heat of the blast on his cheek.

And then, despite the distance between them, he heard the first frigate hit the sandbar. A brutal scraping sound, muted by the sea. The ship came to an abrupt stop. Gabe could picture the sailors aboard being thrown against walls and bulkheads. Some might have even gone overboard.

The second frigate tried to turn, but had been following her sister ship too closely. The sound of the impact wasn't as great this time, but it was still there.

"Now south, Mendez," Gabe said. "Get us the hell out of here."

"With pleasure, sir."

4: DEBRIEF

"After we beached the two enemy frigates—" Gabe said, nearing the end of his statement.

Captain Phillips still eyed him with her unblinking, indifferent stare. Gabe swallowed, and went on.

"—we made for Adena, the next island south of—"

"I know the map, Diaz."

He nodded. "We waited there and watched the two ships for approximately two hours. One managed to free itself, but the other required a tug, which took some time to arrive."

"And they limped back to Gorasnaya?"

"That's the thing, ma'am. They didn't."

She tilted her head slightly, waiting for him to explain. They were in her office. Phillips at her desk, Wyatt and Gabe in the center of the room, facing her. The extra chairs had been conveniently moved to either side of her, forcing them to stand. A little technique she used when she wanted to impress her rank on others.

As Gabe had done several times before when meeting with Phillips in less-than-ideal circumstances, he kept his gaze carefully aimed at a foot-long crack in the wall behind her, rather than on her face. The crack in the wall was so well known to Gabe, in fact, that he thought he knew it better than the Lesser Islands themselves. He *certainly* knew it better than he knew Phillips.

He picked his words carefully.

"The enemy frigates remained at Knifespire." As an afterthought, he added, "At least, as far as we could tell. Didn't wait around to be entirely sure, but from everything I saw… in my opinion, they're staying put."

The Captain's gaze swung, ever so slowly, over to Wyatt. If Gabe's

brother felt any intimidation, he hid it very well. Despite standing at attention, Wyatt somehow managed to be casual about it. Just this side of disrespectful, Gabe thought. It was a fine line to straddle, and a dangerous one at that.

"Any idea why two UIR warships, and a full squad of soldiers, would be so interested in that desolate nothing of a rock?"

Wyatt sighed, which he turned into a shrug. "They're interested because we're interested. If they hadn't been so damned lucky in spotting us as we made shore, they'd have no reason to be there at all."

"But surely," Phillips replied, "once they realize that there's nothing at all of strategic value on Knifespire, they'll clear out and fuck off back to their base, far to the north. Yes?"

"Not my place to say." Another shrug. "Ma'am." He tacked the last word on.

"I can answer that," a new voice said.

Wyatt had gone abruptly rigid, Gabe realized.

At the same instant, Captain Phillips's chair scraped back as she, too, came to attention. Gabe knew when to be curious and when to respect rank. Instead of looking, he faced forward and kept his eyes on that crack in the wall.

"Colonel Hoffman," Phillips said, "what a pleasant surprise."

"At ease, all of you." The man in charge of COG Special Forces stepped into the room, coming to stand between Wyatt and Gabe.

"Sir," Wyatt started, "we need to talk—"

"Later," Hoffman snapped, the word sharp enough to get anyone—even Wyatt—to clap his mouth shut. The Colonel turned to Phillips. "We've got a major fucking problem here, Captain."

She lifted her chin. "The loss of life is awful. No one ever wants to lose a ship, and all hands aboard, but we did manage to rescue a significant number—"

"That is not what I am referring to."

Phillips went silent, her face paling slightly, which for some reason worried Gabe more than anything that had yet happened that day. Still pinning the Captain with his glare, Hoffman spoke to Wyatt.

"Did we lose the equipment?"

"Yes, sir," Wyatt admitted. "No time to rig charges."

"You're supposed to do that first."

"There wasn't time."

"Are you saying the UIR were waiting for you?"

"No, but they were quick. The instant they saw us they came in hard, from three sides. Sank the *Vigil* in one damned lucky shot. Troops coming up from the north shore, and the west. I… had to order a retreat."

"And what orders had Deevers given you, before he went down on the *Vigil*?"

Wyatt hesitated. Then he spoke in the kind of voice only a very, very well-trained soldier could muster, when faced with responsibility for the deaths of others.

"We were to set up the… equipment… without enemy or friendly knowledge, and not let it fall into UIR hands under any circumstances."

"Under. Any. Circumstances."

Hoffman stood there, shaking his head.

"Pardon me, sir?" Gabe asked, ignoring the sudden glare of pure annoyance Phillips shot at him.

"Yes, Lieutenant Colonel?"

"Maybe if you told us what was going on out there, we might be able to help?"

"Do you have a top-secret clearance?"

"No, sir."

"Then why are you even in this room?"

"Because we rescued your men, and we know these islands better than you do. Because—"

"That'll be quite enough, Lieutenant Colonel," Phillips snapped. "Dismissed."

Gabe felt his mouth curl into a snarl and couldn't stop it. He wanted to speak, to help fix this mess because he knew he could.

"As usual," he said under his breath, walking to the door, "regs and ranks instead of results."

"You're confined to quarters for that, Diaz!" Phillips shouted at his back.

"Diaz?" Hoffman said. "Just a second there, Lieutenant Colonel."

Gabe stopped, back still to the room.

"You're Gabriel Diaz," the commander said. "I met your brother, Oscar."

Gabe closed his eyes. He really, *really* didn't need this now.

"Hell of a man, Oscar Diaz."

"No argument there," Gabe said.

"One of the finest soldiers I've had the pleasure to meet, in fact. Listens. Does what he's told. Has respect for authority."

Gabe had thought that by coming to the Lesser Islands he might avoid this comparison, but it always seemed to catch up to him. Oscar was two things Gabe would never be: at once the model soldier and, somehow, the life of the party as well. *Everyone* liked Oscar. Well, almost.

"But," Hoffman said, and his tone changed. Thoughtful instead of condescending. "Maybe you're right about something. Oscar… he's the type who does what he's asked, but I don't know if I'd ever say he got *results*."

Gabe waited.

"Doing what you're asked and getting results… those aren't really the same thing, are they?" Hoffman stepped to Gabe's side, studying his profile.

He stood there for some time, and Gabe decided it was best not to say anything. The man was in the process of changing his mind, and sometimes that was harder than turning a battleship around.

"What the hell," Hoffman said. "Let's get some results, shall we? The status-quo here is going to change, Captain Phillips. It starts with Knifespire, but that's only the first phase of the plan. You and I will talk about that later."

Phillips only nodded, stunned by the implications of his words. So Hoffman went on.

"Right now Knifespire is the priority. Wyatt, explain to them what's going on so we can fix this mess."

Gabe had a strong desire to resume the march of shame to his quarters, to force Phillips to call him back and rescind her punishment, but that went against the whole point of what Hoffman had just said. So he assumed her order had been discarded, and turned back to the room. Her glare told him maybe he was wrong. Then she shifted it to Wyatt, and waited to hear what the Ghost had to say.

"We were tasked with installing a new long-range antenna and comms array on Knifespire. Its tech is more advanced than anything the UIR possesses, and we need to keep it that way."

"Why there?" Phillips asked.

"It was the only place that met our requirements. Far enough from the other islands that signals aren't impeded, and worthless enough that—we'd hoped anyway—no one would come sniffing around there, and find it."

"I would have thought you'd see a long-range dish from miles away," Gabe said.

Wyatt shook his head. "This is new equipment, highly classified. Compact, no bigger than one of our rafts. And though an island chain between it and the enemy would eliminate its effectiveness, a single wall of rock wouldn't."

"Knifespire," Gabe muttered.

"The peak has a cavern, it's like a cathedral. That rock is tall and partly hollow. We figured we could place the listening post on a ledge high up, and acquire sig-int from Gorasnaya for years, right from under their noses."

"Years," Gabe laughed. An involuntary outburst, which he tried to turn into a cough, but failed miserably. The others all looked at him.

"Something amusing about that, Lieutenant Colonel Diaz?" Phillips asked.

Gabe shrugged. "No eighty," he said. At Hoffman's and Wyatt's puzzled looks he explained. "You'll see it all over the place. It's spreading like wildfire through the base personnel. Maybe elsewhere, too. It's a mantra, of sorts. No eightieth year of war, one way or another. That's how it was explained to me."

To his surprise, Hoffman said, "Can't blame people for wanting an end

to the conflict, after all this time. When a war goes on this long, you get a generation of people who know nothing else. Take us four. War's all we know. Personally, I think spreading the idea—that it's possible to have something else—isn't necessarily a bad thing."

Hoffman glanced down at the floor, then.

"'Course, I suppose there are those who, since they know nothing else, would rather continue indefinitely. It is, after all, their entire lives."

"That's true," Gabe said. "Sorry, I just found it a little amusing when Wyatt said 'years.' It just highlights reality and wishful thinking, and how far apart they really are." At that an awkward silence fell across the room. Wyatt cleared his throat. Phillips shifted in her chair, and Gabe wondered if she fell into the second group Hoffman had described.

"Well, let's focus on the immediate problem," the Colonel said, "before we discuss how to stop the pendulum from swinging. Bottom line is, we've got some sensitive equipment on that island that we'd prefer the UIR did not get their hands on."

"Isn't it a bit late for that?" Gabe asked. "Pardon me, sir, but they were all over that island when we left. It must be halfway to Gorasnaya by now." Wyatt cleared his throat again.

"Then we have to hit them en route. Call for air support."

"That's going to create a real mess," Phillips said. Despite everything, she was still trying to maintain the stalemate. "Even if we use aircraft, they'd be nearing port by the time we got there. That's an escalation we don't have the resources to handle."

Wyatt cleared his throat. It was the third time he'd done so, Gabe realized. Hoffman noticed it, too, and gestured, giving him the floor.

"It's possible," Wyatt said, "maybe even likely, that they haven't even entered the spire yet."

"Oh?" Hoffman asked. "Explain."

There was that glint in Wyatt's eye. Gabe knew it all too well. He'd seen it countless times when they were at the orphanage, usually when they sprung a trap on the bullies that made his life such a living hell. Though often successful, the traps would invariably lead to an escalation.

"We, ah, appropriated a large number of air tanks from the warehouse here, along with some paint, and took them with us. The first thing anyone will see on walking into that cavern is a big pile of metal cylinders with chemical waste warnings all over them." Wyatt grinned.

Hoffman's face remained impassive, but it was a posture Gabe also knew well, because he did it all the time himself. That dilemma of being impressed by someone, but not wanting to show it.

"Then maybe we do have a chance," the Colonel said. His voice shifted then. "Conversation *over*." It was the voice of a leader giving orders. "Phillips, do what you've got to do. Under no circumstances should the enemy get their hands on that antenna."

She stood, and saluted. "We'll see to it, sir."

"Good. I'll get out of your hair then, but keep me apprised." He turned to go, but Phillips stopped him.

"Sir, if you don't mind me asking… you must have already been on the way here when this happened. Was there some other purpose to this visit?"

"Surprise inspection." Then he added, "Relax, not of Vectes. I wanted to see how Deevers and his Ghosts got on with this task. And make sure the new antenna works as promised. Instead, Deevers is lost at sea, and my commandos have made a mess of things." With a thumb he gestured toward Wyatt. "So I guess I'll get to see if you're able to handle cleanup."

"We'll try," she said.

"Of course you'll fucking try," he growled. "That's the journey. All I care about is the goal."

"Yes, sir."

Hoffman left, his boots stomping off down the hall, beyond the door, and out into the shipyard. Phillips waited until the sound had completely vanished before speaking again.

"I want a plan on my desk in an hour," she said to Gabe.

Wyatt scoffed. "That's an hour wasted."

"You'll remain quiet, Ghost. In fact, you're dismissed. If Lieutenant Colonel Diaz needs you for this effort, he'll let you know."

"Yes, ma'am." Wyatt said. All the respect he'd shown Hoffman had drained away. With that he spun on his heel, sparing not even a glance for his brother, and strode from the room.

"I think we're done here, Diaz," Phillips said. "Get me a plan. One hour."

"Yes, ma'am." He saluted and left.

Outside, there was no sign of Wyatt. Gabe considered going to find him. To collaborate on a plan as they had so many times before, faced with a whole school of older opponents out to get them. But then, Wyatt had never really contributed to those plans. Mostly he ignored them, or tried to steer Gabe and Oscar into something overly cruel or downright evil. Left to his own devices, Gabe feared what Wyatt might be capable of doing. He supposed that was why he and Oscar had kept the kid so close. A tight leash, as it were.

Problem was, Gabe wasn't the one holding that leash any longer. So he put his brother out of his mind, and went to work on the plan. In his office he went to his desk and shoved aside all the reports and forms awaiting his attention. Then he took down the map of the Lesser Islands that hung on his wall, and spread it across the surface.

When he sat down, his office chair creaked in complaint—something that always annoyed him, and yet for some reason he never found time to fix.

As usual, he ignored it.

* * *

Forty-five minutes later he was back in Phillips's office, standing in front of her desk, hands clasped behind his back.

Her eyes moved rapidly left and right as she read. She scanned the document twice, stopping only to refer to a map she'd placed on the desk beside her, and then once more to look up something in a binder she kept in a drawer.

Gabe waited, once again studying the crack on the wall just above her head. He was expecting questions or criticisms. What he got instead was the sight of his captain taking a red pen from a mug on her desk and rather savagely crossing out several lines and words. She handed it back to him almost casually.

"Other than those things, I approve."

Gabe felt an anger well in him as he scanned her deletions.

"The plan doesn't work without them."

"I think it will."

"Ma'am," he said, tamping down his frustration. "That spec-ops team is highly trained, and they see a lot more fighting on land than we do. This sort of thing is what they know."

"And they've already botched it once," she shot back. "They stay. This is our problem now. We do it our way. 'Bout time they understood they're not the only ones who can accomplish something."

Jaw clenched, Gabe fashioned and then discarded another half-dozen arguments against her stubbornness. He saw it for what it was, and knew she wouldn't back down. This was her chance to show the admirals that she could succeed where Special Forces could not. That narrative would be soured if it was a joint operation.

"May I borrow your pen?" he asked, holding out a hand.

Puzzled, Phillips gave it to him. She watched as Gabe crossed out a single item and wrote just above it. He handed the sheet back. She looked at his change.

Her face darkened.

"Too risky," she said. "That's a lot of firepower for people not trained to use it."

"It's the only way I can make this work, if we're doing it ourselves."

"Too risky," she repeated.

"It's risky either way. This option is risk with a chance—a small chance—of success."

Frowning, she remained silent for several long seconds, but in the end she picked up the stamp from her desk and slammed it down on the top-right corner.

APPROVED

"Don't let me down, Diaz."

He took the page, folded it up, and slipped it into a pocket, knowing it would never see the light of day again.

Once outside, he went straight to the tent where Wyatt and the rest of the Ghosts waited.

"When do we leave?" Wyatt asked.

"You're staying here."

Wyatt exploded. A stream of barely coherent swearing. The other Ghosts behind him looked ready to take up arms. Gabe held up a hand, waiting for his brother to blow off steam.

"Look, I don't like it either, but that's how it's going to be."

"No offense, brother, but your people aren't up to this. You need us."

"What I need," Gabe said, "is to borrow something. You took our air tanks, now we need a few things from you."

"Like what?"

Gabe told him.

"You're fucking crazy."

"Look who's talking."

"I could make you get Hoffman to approve that request."

"You could." Gabe nodded. "And he would. You *know* he would. So let's just cut out that part so I can get underway."

It took nearly five minutes for Wyatt to gather the requested items from his team, who were very reluctant to give the equipment up. Once again Gabe had the strong sense that, had they sent anyone else but Wyatt on this mission, things might be going very differently right now. But Gabe had a currency of sorts. This was his brother. Gabe had practically raised him.

The explosives and other equipment went into a crate, which Gabe carried across the base to the dock. He left it there—under guard—and went to gather his sailors and Gears.

A lot more of them, this time.

5: CANDLE IN THE DARK

The group of patrol boats pushed north for hours, into the warmer waters of the central Lesser Islands. They gathered in the shadow of Adena Island, half a mile from shore. Imposing jungle dominated the sparsely populated place. The lone fishing village was dark, as was the islanders' way. A neutral people caught up in the greater war, they kept to a blackout, so as not to provide a navigational aid to either side. Other than the gentle sway of palm trees, nothing moved.

Gabe Diaz checked his watch. 25:59.

"Set off at midnight?" Mendez asked.

"No. We wait until seven minutes after."

"It'd be easier to coordinate with an even number." The pilot sounded annoyed, and rightfully so. Gabe had interrupted their dinner, and other than naps grabbed on the way out here, none of them would get any sleep tonight.

It was a state of mind, he thought, that flowed down from Phillips to the rest of the base. Complacency. The stalemate that had settled over the Lesser Islands was good enough, since the islands were essentially worthless. Hoffman had hinted at changes to come, though. Someday, maybe, the COG would need the UIR Imulsion rig at the north end. Or the UIR would want to take Vectes so they could refuel submarines there. Until either of those happened, Phillips—like her predecessor—seemed perfectly happy with the dividing line at the center of the chain. A line on a map, nothing more.

One that cut right across Knifespire.

"That's exactly why we don't go at the hour," Gabe said. "If it makes sense to do it on the hour, then that's when they'll be expecting it."

"What makes no sense, if I may say so, sir, is attacking a rocky shore like

that in the dead of night."

"Same principle applies," Gabe replied. "Sometimes the best way to outsmart someone is to do the stupid thing."

"You said it, sir. Not me."

"So I did. Get me comms with the other squad leaders, will you?"

Mendez tapped at the console for a moment, then nodded at Gabe, who activated his transmitter.

"Listen up," he said. "I know this op is risky, but that's what we all signed up for. Time isn't on our side here. Each of you carries a pair of night-vision goggles grudgingly supplied to us by the Ghosts we rescued yesterday. They're state of the art. I'll leave it up to you how best to use them. It's going to be dark on Knifespire, and that's an advantage we need to keep as long as possible.

"Our primary objective is the spire itself," he continued. "More specifically, a cave called Cathedral, located at its base. The only approach is via Gatka Ridge, and without doubt the enemy will have that well-guarded."

"Why aren't the Ghosts handling this themselves?" someone asked. Gabe didn't bother to ask who, it was a good question.

"We pulled them off this island once already. They were ambushed, and they didn't come here with the equipment or firepower to handle an enemy force this big. They were here to install some tech, then vanish. Nothing more. Plus they lost their LCU and all hands onboard."

"Sir, it still seems—"

"I don't care what it seems," he said tersely. "Command handed this responsibility to us, and to be honest I think they just see us as cannon fodder that will buy time until a full platoon can arrive. Let's prove them wrong."

This got a chorus of agreement. Playing up rivalries was a tried-and-true technique that Gabe normally preferred not to employ, but time was getting away from him.

Their fleet had six boats, with the other ten waiting back at Vectes, ready to launch within minutes of being called upon. Phillips made it very clear that Gabe *wouldn't* need them. She probably had a number on a piece of paper, too, with the label "acceptable losses" next to it.

Gabe addressed four of the ranking Gears. "You'll hit Scabbard Cove. Secure the beach and get up on Gatka Ridge as quickly as you can. If you can move toward the spire from there, I'll be pleased and surprised. Do so if you can, but the main purpose of your assault is to keep the enemy's focus on that approach."

They called in their affirmatives.

"Blair and Akino, your squads are with me." Blair was already on his boat, as before, along with her squad. Akino was on another. "We're going to retrace our path from yesterday, approach from the west, and find a way up to Cathedral without need of the ridge."

"But you said the ridge was the only way up," Blair observed.

"That's what the maps say," Gabe agreed, "and what the UIR will be thinking."

"You know something the maps don't *again*, sir?"

Gabe met her gaze. "Not this time," he said. "We'll find a way up, or we'll make one."

Blair drew in a deep breath and let it out. Apparently that was all the agreement he was going to get.

"Pilots," Gabe said, *"at some point darkness will become a hindrance instead of an advantage. Be ready with the flare guns, and on my order put them over the south side of the island. It'll reveal the enemy, and give us shadow. Ditch your goggles at that point."*

There seemed to be nothing else to say. He checked his watch again.

"Two minutes. Make me proud. Once the island is in view I want radio silence until we hit the shore."

Gabe turned off the comm and clapped Mendez on the shoulder. The man looked profoundly unhappy. Approaching a rocky shoreline at night like this was the epitome of risk to a boat and her crew.

"You proved to me yesterday you can handle this," Gabe told him. "I've no doubt you can get us onto that island safely." Mendez dipped his chin, then went back to his controls and started conferring with the navigator in a low voice. Gabe turned back to the Gears, then, and readied his own kit. Lancer, extra magazines, and grenades.

"Sir?" Davis said.

He glanced at the sniper and nodded. "Go ahead."

"Am I on the roof again?"

"No, Davis, I want you on the island with us. I have a special task for you."

She didn't quite manage to hide her grin.

"Everyone bring grenades," Gabe told the group. "If we can't secure that tech, our orders are to make sure the enemy doesn't get it." Assuming they hadn't already dismantled the damn thing, and moved it to their base for study. Gabe put that possibility out of mind.

When the minute hand reached seven, the boats roared to life in unison. Four went around the eastern side, making for Knifespire and, specifically, Scabbard Cove. The other two went west, out to sea, taking the longer way round.

As the boat powered westward, Gabe watched Adena Island recede into the distance. The island was dark against the sky, nothing more than a silhouette beneath the stars.

He knew of the unwritten rule the islanders adhered to, keeping a strict blackout at night. They took no part in the conflict, their peaceful tradition as old as the islands themselves, it sometimes seemed.

So it was odd to see a single, dim light flickering there now, almost as if

staring back at him. Someone was up late, perhaps a mother caring for her sick child, or just a careless mistake by an old fisherman up to take a piss. A mistake that ordinarily would have gone unnoticed.

He watched the light until it, too, faded into the distance.

* * *

That light was, in fact, a candle.

It sat on a desk beneath a window in a small hut at the edge of the village. The man sitting at that desk had come to Adena three years ago, an outcast from another island farther south, or so he'd said. He had the accent, anyway, and he came with a fishing boat and items to trade.

No one really cared where he was from, in truth. Adena's population had been in decline for decades, ever since it had found itself in the middle of a sea endlessly patrolled by two warring sides. A newcomer meant a better catch, and that meant more trade.

Of course, they would have frowned upon his use of a candle after dark. Cast him out, even. But he'd chosen the location for his hut well. The only one of them on the western side, facing that direction. Too many bugs, too stiff a breeze, the others felt. He told them he could put up with these things because of the spectacular view.

Sitting at the window, candle at his elbow, the man in the hut watched two COG boats move off to the northwest, toward open ocean. This was strange. They were small boats, with only a ninety-mile nominal range, capable of carrying six to ten soldiers in addition to a crew of three. COG Patrol. Armament was a forward deck gun, .50 caliber rotary style. The vessel's draft was three feet. On a piece of paper he noted the designation, the heading and speed, and a few other observations.

Then began the laborious process of encrypting his notes with a pad the UIR had provided when they'd recruited him.

He'd offered his services to the COG, first. Like most islanders he didn't care about either side or their ridiculous war. The COG had just been closer, that was all, but a Gear had stopped him at the gate to Vectes and cut him off halfway through his proposal.

"You smell like fish, islander," the man had said, disgusted. "Come back after you've had a shower. Is that a term you know, islander? Shower?"

He'd walked away with their laughter behind him. Returned to his boat, sailed north—*all the way north*—and tried his luck there. The UIR had welcomed him.

Ciprian Demov powered up the transmitter and began to tap in the coded message, as he had the day before when the LCU had passed by. Once done, he burned the paper before returning to his vigil at the window.

"Ten goras says they don't come back," he said to his companion.

The monkey hissed at him, then went back to its fitful sleep, stretched

out across its master's shoulders.

6: CATHEDRAL WALTZ

Still half a mile from shore, Gabe knew his ruse had failed. Badly.

Maybe he'd tried to be too clever. That was the only explanation that came to mind. Returning to Knifespire via the same route they'd taken before, sailing right over the sandbar, had seemed like the right move. Who would expect them to use the same path again?

Whoever was commanding the UIR force, that's who.

Gabe had been out-thought.

Or, worse, someone had talked. That seemed unlikely, though.The only people who knew this part of the plan were on his boat or the other, and there wasn't exactly a private place from which to get a message off.

All this went through his mind in a split second, while everything went to hell.

The first sign of trouble was the fleet of enemy patrol boats, running dark and keeping in the deep clefts of the shore on this side. All at once they lit up their searchlights, utterly blinding when viewed through night-vision goggles. Gabe tore his from his head and tossed them aside.

There were eight of the enemy boats. Gabe wasn't even to shore yet and already he was outnumbered four to one.

That wasn't the worst of it.

Before Gabe could grasp what he was seeing, Gian had roared the one word every sailor dreaded to hear.

"TORPEDO!"

There was no time to think. Luckily, Mendez had the instincts of a veteran pilot. He yanked the wheel hard to starboard. His counterpart in the other boat went to port at the same instant.

The torpedo exploded between them.

Neither boat was damaged. The quick maneuver had spared them that,

but neither could avoid the sudden surge of the sea beneath them. The deck beneath Gabe's feet tilted violently. He felt the upward surge, tossing him into the air. Somehow he had the presence of mind to let go of the railing and let himself be thrown free.

Then the water hit him. Cold, dark. Unbelievably dark.

Gabe propelled himself under. Behind him came the crash of the patrol boat as it hit the waves again. The sound of it, even muted by the water, was shocking. He kicked away, then up. By now he should have hit the surface. There'd been no time to draw a breath, and already his lungs were screaming. He kicked again, pulled back against the water with both hands.

Suddenly he broke the surface. Cool night air. He gulped it in, caring in that instant about nothing else.

Something tapped across the water, skipping past him like a flat stone thrown across a placid lake. Another followed. Then the sound arrived. Machine-gun fire. Those UIR patrollers. There was no time to look around, to take stock. He took a deep breath and kicked under the water again.

Gabe swam toward his boat. It was just a blur in the distance, maybe thirty feet away. Had he been thrown that far? Had to have been. He kicked harder, putting all his strength into it. He had to make it to the deck, get to the rotary cannon.

A flash of yellow blinded him. The shockwave, dulled by the ocean, still hit him like a fist. Gabe was rocked backward, all thought banished. When his senses returned he didn't know up from down. Panic crept in, overwhelming him. He battled it back, forcing himself to remain calm. Panic would lead to certain death. He had to survive.

And what? Get blown to pieces by those machine guns? Or would they just haul him from the waves and toss him in prison?

Still, he had to try.

He came to the surface slowly this time. Barely a ripple announced his presence. His patrol boat was on fire and sinking fast. The other was gone already.

A body lay in the water nearby, face down, arms out. No doubt as to their fate. Still, he kicked to it and lifted the shoulder enough to see who it was. The lack of armor meant one of the crew. It was his navigator. Gabe realized then he'd never bothered to learn the man's name. He'd done his job so quietly and competently that there'd been no need.

Gabe patted the man's shoulder and said a silent thanks for the sacrifice he'd made.

Then he noticed the change.

The enemy lights had gone. Or, not gone, but shifted drastically. The eight enemy patrol boats were moving off, to either end of Knifespire, and at speed. He knew at once what it meant.

They'd learned of Gabe's approach from the west, somehow, and assumed that was the whole of the COG assault force. Which meant the

other four boats had most likely arrived at Scabbard Cove to minimal, if any, resistance. They were supposed to be the diversion, but in reality it was Gabe's two-boat attack force that had misdirected the enemy.

Either way, it had earned him a few precious minutes. He intended to make full use of them, and shouted into the darkness.

"Anyone there? Sound off!"

Names began to come to him over the chaos, the flames, the waves. For the moment Gabe was counting. Two lost. Less than he'd guessed, but not a stellar beginning to the night.

"Any wounded?"

Only one called back. A Gear named Mendoza.

"I've got him!" Blair called out.

"Everyone swim for shore. We don't have much time. They'll be back." He decided to leave out his deeper fear. That torpedo had come from a submarine, from somewhere behind them, and no doubt they were still lurking in the darkness. They'd surface soon, and could use their deck guns to take care of any survivors.

Then Gabe had an idea.

He heard others start the grueling swim toward the dark, imposing shape of Knifespire. He hoped they'd remember the plan—the small cleft in the rock near the spire, with water pouring out into the sea. A stream, which meant a ravine that might be a way ashore. Slim as plans went, but it was the best he'd been able to come up with. Of course, that plan had relied on the two boats to get them in close, and take them out again if no path could be found up to the jungle.

Gabe swam west, out to sea. Calm, slow movements, his head always above water, every sense open and waiting for any sign of his prey.

It arrived seconds later, and closer than he'd expected.

The water beneath him began to froth, then bulge upward. Then the conning tower emerged from the waves, behind him. Before he could spin around he felt the deck of the submarine press against his feet. He grabbed on for dear life as the boat surfaced, water pouring off its deck and hull.

There was no time to appreciate his luck. He crawled, then managed a controlled stumble, toward the conning tower. There was a ladder on the side. He scrambled upward. From above came a shriek of metal as the hatch was opened.

Two rungs from the top, Gabe heard someone talking in a low voice, describing the position and quantity of the COG survivors swimming frantically toward shore. Gabe heaved himself up the last rung, putting himself waist-high above the edge of the tower.

The sailor had his back to Gabe.

The hatch was still open.

Gabe dropped a live grenade inside. One of the high-explosive variety he'd borrowed from Wyatt's Ghosts. Once it left his hand he had five

seconds. Someone shouted a cry of alarm from below as Gabe sent a second grenade rattling onto the metal platform where the sailor stood. The man turned around in time to see an MX8 Snub pistol pointed at his chest. Gabe fired twice, straight into the heart, and then threw himself from the tower.

It was a bad jump, and he hit the water on his side, arms and legs flailing. In that same instant the conning tower exploded. A bright fireball from the platform, along with a deep thud from inside.

Gabe was in the waves, then, stinging from the impact with the ocean. He fought for the surface once again. What sort of damage he'd done to the submarine, he had no idea, but the gambit worked. The commander would have to assume a full-scale assault on his ship. It began to turn, but not submerge. He'd destroyed the hatch and damaged the tower badly enough that they had to worry about flooding should they dive.

He turned all his attention, and what energy he could muster, toward reaching shore. Glancing back, he saw the submarine sailing west to deeper waters, her still-exposed tower roiling with flame and dimly visible inky black smoke.

He faced forward again, and the minutes blurred together. His world became that wall of rock, which seemed to remain exactly the same distance away. Pulling and kicking, he spat salty water from his mouth whenever a sudden wave would slap across the side of his face. Time became a fuzzy thing.

And then it wasn't.

He remembered his comm, and tapped it. There was a voice in his ear. Radio silence was no longer a priority, which he supposed was for the best. Radio silence only worked when everyone was where they were supposed to be, and the plan was still the plan.

"…a foothold, but… to the top. Advise."

"Need," Gabe said, "help." His limbs were like noodles, his energy spent. Staying above water was becoming impossible. But someone was talking over him. Their words were garbled, partly by interference and partly by a sudden swell that crashed over him and sent him under again. Then he realized, somehow, that the waves were pushing him toward the place he needed to be. He remembered his training. The words of his instructor still clear in his mind.

"Let the ocean win for ninety seconds out of a hundred. You only need to win for ten, and you'll survive. That's all that matters."

So he put his face in the water and made himself into a star, arms and legs spread. He floated on the waves, which grew stronger, and when he could stand it no more, when he'd let the sea win for as long as his lungs could stand, Gabe trod water long enough to satisfy his lungs. Ten seconds of deep breaths, then back to the dead-man's float and the mercy of the sea.

A fine plan until his leg smashed into a rock.

Jerking himself upright, he howled in agony. Absolute darkness filled his

vision and it took him a second to recognize it for what it was. The wall. The edge of Knifespire Island.

He bit back the throbbing pain and cast about, trying to recognize something… anything… that might tell him which way to go.

"Flares," Gabe said into his radio. "Flares. Now. Flares!"

He had no idea if anyone was even listening at this point. He tried to push backward, to keep himself from being smashed against the unforgiving rock in front of him, twenty feet high. Just a wall of black, and the hint of starry sky above it.

Then a flare lit the world in a brilliant orange.

Another… and another!

Launched from the boats, the glowing stars of flickering light began to drift slowly downward, swaying in the wind. This gave the light they cast an almost drunken quality, and with three of them alight at once the effect bordered on psychedelic. But it was enough.

Gabe glanced right, then left. And to the left he saw them. Several pairs of glowing red eyes. His Gears in their borrowed night-vision goggles. As his eyes adjusted, Gabe spotted a sailor as well, clambering into a ravine where white water spilled over the rocks and into the sea. He threw all his energy into the swim. A hundred yards, that was all. He could make that. He had to.

The rocks at the mouth of the stream were smooth and slick, but worn down, too. He pulled himself up the first he came to and rested. Then he reached for another, but it wasn't rock he found. It was the clasp of another hand.

"Thought we'd lost you," Blair said, pulling him up onto a large natural platform on the side of the ravine. "Uh, LC, did you just take out an Indie sub? By yourself?"

"Damaged it is all," he replied, lying down to catch his breath. "With any luck it won't be back."

"You saved our asses."

"Talk to me about it when we're back at base, okay?"

She grimaced, and nodded.

"Where's Davis?"

The sniper came over to him, eager as ever.

"You up for a climb?"

"Yessir."

"Good. Blair, I want you and Davis to find us a way out of this ravine. Report back when you've got a path."

The pair moved off and started to work their way along the ravine wall, heading upstream. Blair understood, without needing to be told, that a straight climb wouldn't work with everyone banged up and still recovering. The flares still hung in the air above them, but they wouldn't do so for long.

The other survivors were all there on the ledge. Most were crouched and

getting ready to move. A few were sitting, still catching their breath. One retched, throwing up a mouthful of seawater onto the rock. Gian was tending to him. Gabe sat up and got on his comm.

"This is Diaz. Squad leaders, report."

"Orange squad," a voice said. *"Gavin here. Posada was killed, sir. I'm sorry. We're working our way up Gatka Ridge."* Green, Black, and White all reported in, too. They'd made Scabbard Cove and moved up onto the ridge, but no farther.

"The enemy were clustered around Cathedral," Gavin said, *"but I don't think they were dug in or even guarding it. They were working."*

"Working on what?"

"Best guess, getting inside."

Gabe thought of the fake containers of toxic waste, and wondered if the UIR had realized they'd been tricked.

"Acknowledged. Stick to the plan, for now." They had to get a solid foothold on the ridge, then keep the enemy busy. He switched the comm off and raised his voice for those who were gathered on the rock. "Listen up. We lost two boats, but we still have four. We can do this. Remember the plan."

They nodded. Grim, determined faces stared back at him. Then Blair scrambled back down the ravine.

"There's a way up," she said, pulling her goggles up.

"What's waiting for us?"

"A bunch of UIR." She shrugged. "Maybe a couple dozen, but shouldn't be more than we can handle."

"Good," he said. "We'll go now, while there's still a chance. Everyone, fall in."

They did so, and Blair led them up the ravine. To Gabe it felt like the world's worst stairway. Uneven steps of mismatched size, slick with water and hidden in shadow. The placement of each foot required total concentration. In several places, Blair stopped to help Gabe up, then Gabe would turn and do the same for the person behind him. And so on, down the line.

When they were at best halfway to the top the flares burned out. Instead of deep shadows and orange-lit rock, everything was dark. They paused to let their eyes adjust. Those who still had their night-vision goggles pulled them back on. Then everyone continued up the treacherous path.

At the top he found Davis. She lay on a stone slab about six feet across, the barrel of her Longshot poking through a gap in a natural stone wall maybe twenty feet long and, in places, as much as three feet high.

"I count at least forty of them," she said, her voice low. "Seventy-five yards dead ahead."

He lay beside her and took a look through the same gap.

Sure enough, roughly forty Gorasni guerillas were arrayed around the

entrance to a cavern at the base of the huge, sheer face that was Knifespire. The area around the entrance was a circular depression about thirty feet in diameter. Water splashed at the feet of the soldiers moving in and out of the cave. The ones coming out carried the air tanks. So, Wyatt's decoys were no longer fooling them. At least a dozen had already been brought out and dumped into the shallow pond.

Gabe ground his teeth. The odds weren't in his favor, numbers-wise. Numbers weren't the whole picture, though. The UIR had taken a strong defensive position, and had the Cathedral for shelter if their position was compromised. Still, Gabe's group had surprise on their side.

That counted for a lot.

"Everyone be ready," he said, once his people were out of the ravine and crouched behind the rock wall. Into the comm he said, "Gavin, I want a coordinated assault the instant the next set of flares lights up. Pin them down, keep their attention on Gatka Ridge. We'll flank them once they commit to fending your squads off."

"Understood," the sergeant replied.

"CNVs, give me flares in exactly one minute."

The patrol boat pilots acknowledged.

Gabe switched off his comm. "Listen up. We get as close as we can. Bull rush. No one fires until they realize we're coming."

Nods all around.

"Davis?" he called out.

She turned to him.

"I want you—"

"This is a solid overwatch position, sir," she said before he could ask her to move.

"I know that, soldier, but I have something else in mind for you." She eyed him suspiciously, but once he explained himself, her concern had transformed into a sly half-smile.

"Understood," she said when he'd finished.

Gabe pointed toward a spot on the massive rock formation that gave the island its name. About two-thirds of the way up there was a narrow section, as if some massive hand had squeezed the rock together. "There," Gabe said. "There will be a flat spot for you, plus the overhang will shadow your position."

"It's a long climb," she replied.

"If you can't handle it—"

"Oh, I can handle it, sir. I know you go running in the mornings. Guess what I do?"

He grinned at her. "Did you get a pair of night-vision goggles?"

"No," she admitted. "Can't use them with a rifle scope."

"But you can for a climb. Take someone else's and stick to the north face, you'll be practically invisible once we light up the ridge."

"Okay."

"Good. Get going."

Davis saluted, and moved away, grabbing a pair of goggles from Blair as she went.

Gabe's two squads divided themselves at either end of the low, jagged wall. The sailors, sidearms in hand, waited several feet behind, ready to act as a reserve or to cover a retreat, depending on how things shook out.

Orange lights erupted in the sky.

One, two, then a third.

Dizzying shadows began to sway and twist around the landscape as the flares slowly drifted back down.

Then an RPG hit the UIR position.

"Go!" Gabe hissed into his comm.

The UIR soldiers took aim in the direction the Longspear's RPG had come from, firing back in small bursts. In response they received an all-out barrage from the COG forces moving onto the ridge, pushing them back behind their cover positions. More rockets exploded around them. Bullets tore into trees and rock alike. One grenade sailed past the front line and slammed into the side of the spire, sending a shower of rock and debris down on the Gorasni grunts who had been trying to clear the cavern of the air tanks.

Gabe was up and running, five steps behind Blair, the rest of her squad all around him. Off to the right, Akino's squad moved through a maze of trees and vines, using their night-vision goggles to pick through the dense undergrowth with relative ease.

So far none of the Indies had spotted their approach.

He could only hope Davis wouldn't be spotted climbing the spire. While Gabe's flanking maneuver used the frontal assault to cover their approach, she was relying on darkness, or barring that, on the enemy not bothering to look up.

"Incoming frigates!" one of the pilots shouted in Gabe's ear, and through the comm he heard their deck guns fire. Four booming thuds Gabe felt in his chest, despite the island in between. A series of flashes lit the clouds from somewhere to the south.

"Back off," Gabe told the pilots. "We lose you and we're all stuck here."

"They're not firing at us!"

Gabe felt his stomach tighten. If they weren't taking on the patrol boats, that meant their guns were trained on Scabbard Cove, and the ridge above.

"Gavin!" he called into the comm, but the link had turned to chaos. Chatter from all over the place. Then Gabe had his own problems to worry about. Ahead, one of the Gorasni soldiers hauling air tanks from the cave mouth stopped, and looked up. He stared straight at Gabe.

Blair saw him, too. She dropped to a knee behind a bush and brought her Lancer up. Squeezed off a quick controlled burst. The man fell where he

stood, his mouth open to cry alarm but no sound escaping. Unfortunately, the air tank fell from his lifeless grip, landing atop another that had already been removed from the cave. The two metal tanks clanged together, and the resulting *gong* could probably be heard for miles, even over the battle.

Gabe surged ahead. The element of surprise was gone. His decoy force was being pummeled by UIR frigates that, while close to the shore, were safely out of range on the other side of the tiny island.

Well, not *quite* out of range.

"Davis?"

"Almost in position, sir."

"Forget stealth, they're onto us. I need you up there five seconds ago."

"Affirmative."

He raced up to the edge of the pond, firing on the line of UIR soldiers that had taken up positions to defend against the force coming up the ridge. They were totally exposed, and most scrambled for new cover instead of returning fire. Several made it. Most did not.

"Akino," Gabe said, "take the cave."

She acknowledged, and led her squad off toward the mouth of the cavern.

Meanwhile, Blair pulled up behind the pile of air tanks. Unwittingly, the enemy had created great cover for the incoming Gears. They rushed up at a crouch and dove behind the tanks as the Gorasni soldiers finally managed to organize a line of their own. This forced them, however, to turn their backs on the force coming up Gatka Ridge.

If there still is *a force on Gatka Ridge*, Gabe thought. The way those deck guns were going—

"I'm in position," Davis said in his ear.

"How's it look? Good roost?"

The reply took a few seconds. *"The view is excellent, but I'm not sure about the spire. Stress fractures everywhere. If they spot me, shoot back with those cannons, it's all likely to come down around me."*

"Don't let them spot you, then," he said, trying to keep the worry from his voice.

"No intention to, sir."

"Good. You know what to do," he replied. Moving to the pile of air tanks, he took up a position next to Blair. Together they popped over the top of the makeshift barrier and rattled off shots. Already the rock formation behind which the Gorasni now hid was riddled with bullet holes, and crumbling in places.

"Get some grenades on that," he told Blair. She nodded and relayed the order to her Gears.

From somewhere above, the first round from Davis's Longshot ripped across the landscape.

"One gunner down," she said, matter of fact.

Gabe couldn't help but smile. The Gorasni frigates might have some damned powerful artillery, but the vessels were old and weren't designed around modern equipment. Instead of being below-decks, targeting enemy positions on computer screens, the UIR gunners had to sit at mechanical controls attached to the guns themselves, peering through scopes to study the results of their efforts.

Given a proper vantage point, a skilled sniper could exploit that. It had been years since such a skirmish had reared its head in the Lesser Islands, though, and Gabe had hoped the enemy had forgotten this danger.

He'd been right.

"Another gunner down," Davis said. *"Fish in a barrel, sir."*

"Stay focused, soldier," he replied. Already the rate of shelling from the enemy ships had diminished. Two more shots sounded, and the enemy guns were silenced altogether.

Gabe ducked as a haphazard spray of machine-gun fire rattled across the pile of air tanks. Some of them hissed as rounds punctured their thick metal walls. He glanced at the cave mouth. From within, yellow light flashed across the rocky tunnel walls. Gunfire. Lancers and Markza assault rifles intermingled. Then a lull in the blasts, within which Gabe heard the sound of bayonets plunging through flesh. Someone screamed, instantly silenced by a wet, dull crunch.

"We need more people in there."

"We need more people everywhere," Blair shot back, eyes wild.

"Get a grip on yourself, Sergeant. Just hold this position. Move up to their wall when you can. I'll take the sailors and we'll reinforce the cave."

She took a second to wrap her brain around his words. Finally she nodded, renewing her grip on the handle of her rifle. Gabe clapped her on the shoulder and pushed away from the stack of air tanks. He ran hunched over along the line of Gears until he found Mendez and Gian at the edge of the jungle.

"With me," he said in a tone that he hoped broached no argument. Moving to the cave mouth, he took up a position just outside on the left. Mendez, who wasn't a soldier and, as far as Gabe knew, had never done anything in his career except steer a ship, instinctively took the right. Gian fell in beside him. Their eyes met Gabe's.

He nodded and rounded the corner, gun up and ready.

There was a dead Gorasni in the entrance, his Booshka grenade launcher lying beside him, smoke curling from the barrel. Gian holstered her sidearm and grabbed the unfamiliar weapon. An expression of curiosity crossed her face, but she quickly fought it back.

"Enclosed space," Gabe said to her, shaking his head. "You'll bring the roof down on our heads."

Gian grimaced and tossed the weapon aside. Then she found a Markza —the sniper variety—and picked it up. Her eyes went to Gabe, seeking

approval.

"In here it'll be more useful swung like a club," he said, "but you decide."

She kept the weapon.

The fighting was ahead of them, deeper in the cave. He wiped the sweat from his brow and rushed forward, through a narrow gap in the twisting tunnel. Gian and Mendez ran after him. They were sailors, he reminded himself, untrained in this kind of thing, but they were still COG, and damned smart from what he'd seen. So he threw his trust in their ability to watch his back. This needed to end quickly, before those frigates found safer waters from which to fire their guns. They'd pulverize this island if allowed, he had no doubt.

"The boats are moving," Davis said in his ear, as if reading his thoughts.

"South?" South made sense. They could take on the patrol boats, strand the Gears on the island, and pick them off at their leisure.

"No," she said. *"North."*

"North? You sure?"

"Very," she replied. *"I'm losing sight of them… they're gone."*

He put this information aside for the moment, because from around the next corner came the sound of Lancer fire.

Gabe took the corner at speed.

A large chamber lay before him. Fifty feet across and at least as high, coming to a naturally domed ceiling free of the stalactites he'd expected to see. Cathedral, indeed. Part of the ceiling was hidden in shadow, implying the ledge Wyatt had described where the antenna had been installed. A pair of cables hung down from the darkness, and Gabe thought he could see the corner of a gray metallic box just poking out from the ledge. The equipment was still up there.

Gabe ignored it for now. *Take the island first, then deal with the antenna*, he told himself.

In front of him was a scene of chaos and carnage, lit by shoulder lamps that twisted violently. Men and women—COG and UIR—all embroiled in melee combat. Akino was on the ground. Above her, a UIR grunt hefted a pilfered Lancer over his head. He held it like a stake, bayonet blade pointed down.

Gabe shot him in the back of the knee.

The soldier buckled and toppled over sideways. The stolen gun clattered across the dirty, blood-soaked ground. As the man fell he twisted, drawing a sidearm. Gabe dove to his left as the shot rang out. He heard it hiss past his ear, and then heard a grunt behind him as someone else took the round.

No time to see who. He landed in a sideways roll and tried to stand, but someone kicked him back to the ground. The Indie grunt. He pressed Gabe into the dirt and aimed his pistol at Gabe's face. He never saw the butt of the Markza.

Gian swung it so hard into the back of the man's head that his skull caved in. Gore splattered across the ground. The man fell, eyes rolling back as he hit the ground next to Gabe.

"Thanks," Gabe said, reaching up. Gian was too stunned to help him up, though. Her eyes were locked on the fallen enemy, her hands still tight on the barrel of the rifle.

Then Mendez was there, next to her. He grasped Gabe's outstretched hand and hefted him to his feet. He'd lifted Gabe with his left hand, and winced while doing so. Gabe saw the blood splotch at his right shoulder, then. It was growing larger by the second.

Around them the sounds of fighting died out.

Glancing across the space, Gabe found Akino and helped her up. She had a nasty gash across her forehead, but seemed otherwise unscathed.

The enemy were all dead, or had vanished. Four COG were dead, too, and several more were wounded. Gabe glanced at Mendez.

"Find a medic kit," he said, "get that patched."

"It's not as bad as it looks," Mendez replied.

"Do it anyway. Go."

The pilot nodded, turned, left. With a glance at Gabe, which was all the permission she needed, Gian followed her crewmate.

"There another way out of here?" Gabe asked Akino.

Her brow furrowed. "A passage on the north side. Not sure if it's a way out, though, or just goes deeper."

He nodded. "How bad is that?" he asked, eyeing the gash.

"It'll heal."

"Good. You're with me, then." He gestured toward two Gears standing just behind her. "You two as well. The rest of you, hold this room. Once the area's secure we'll see to that antenna."

Nods and acknowledgements greeted his words. Satisfied, Gabe crossed the space to the tunnel on the north side, Akino and her two Gears right behind him. It was barely wide enough to squeeze through. Gabe went first, his rifle slung and pistol in hand.

He scanned for traps, or at least enemies lying in wait. Expected a twisting tunnel that might take him down deep underground, or up into the reaches of the spire. Instead, he navigated two more corners and found himself in the jungle, on a narrow bluff at the northern tip of the island.

Below him ocean waves crashed onto a rock-strewn shore. UIR soldiers were pushing out into the waves, swimming. Inflatable landing craft were streaming toward them, and beyond, but far too close for comfort, were the two frigates. One had already turned toward the north, powering off into the night.

The other, though, waited for the rafts that zoomed toward it, bouncing off whitecap waves that reached ten feet high and crashed down violently. They were evacuating, Gabe realized, but that didn't mean—

"Back!" he shouted.

The first shot from the frigate's deck gun went wide, glancing off the side of the spire. Gabe ignored it, ushering the Gears into the cave again. They all moved in. All except Akino.

She'd turned toward the sea, and lay in a crevice in the rock. Somewhere along the way she'd found a Longspear rocket launcher—where, Gabe had no idea—and was aiming it at the frigate. Two steps into the cave, Gabe turned to go back for her.

Akino fired.

The frigate fired.

Her rocket zipped across the space between, just above the waves, but Gabe never saw the impact. A heartbeat later the ground where Akino lay erupted in fire, smoke, and jagged chunks of rock. She vanished instantly. The ground where she lay was thrown up and out in all directions, spraying against Gabe's armor, his face. He turned away from the shrapnel and heat, the shockwave throwing him back.

When Gabe found his senses again, he forced himself to stand. Someone was helping him, a hand under his armpit, lifting. It was so quiet. Just that high-pitched ringing to go with the stars that swam in front of his eyes. He closed them, shook his head. When he opened them again his vision had cleared, and he could hear someone shouting at him, but they sounded miles away.

He saw the part of the cliff where Akino had been. A half-circle chunk of ground around her position had vanished. Even as he stared at the spot, more chunks of loosened rock and dirt crumbled away, disappearing below the lip of the cliff and crashing into the sea below.

Then he saw the frigate.

Fire and smoke billowed from her bridge, out through shattered windows. UIR sailors scrambled all over her deck, throwing water on the fire or spraying it with extinguishers. One figure on the deck stood still, though. He was facing Gabe. Even from this distance Gabe knew it was the man he'd seen on his first visit to the island. The tanned skin, the clean-shaven scalp. A bandaged shoulder.

Their eyes locked. Then the man grinned, lifted a hand, and gestured.

The deck gun fired once more.

Gabe closed his eyes, expecting to die, but he was pulled backward, deeper into the tunnel. The shell sailed just a hair too high. It pounded into the spire just above the northern entrance.

The tunnel mouth collapsed, completely blocked off.

"They're leaving," Davis said in his ear. *"We did it, sir."*

Tell that to Akino, he thought.

7: WAITING GAME

The shelling of the spire, and the combat within it, left the interior chamber full of choking dust and soot. Gabe had no choice but to gather everyone outside on Gatka Ridge until the dust cleared.

All except Davis, whom Gabe asked to stay in her perch halfway up the spire. He sent Orange Squad's sniper to join her there, to act as her spotter, or just to give her a break.

"Squad leaders, report," he said, once everyone had assembled.

One by one they did so. Blair went last. Her situation was similar to what the other squads reported.

"Blue lost two Gears, plus one incapacitated and in need of medical attention," she said, battling back the emotion in her voice. "We're low on ammo too, sir."

"Aren't we all," he said. "I'm sorry for your losses. We'll lift a glass to all of them when we get back to Vectes." She just nodded. It was part of the job, but never easy, especially for someone in command.

"What now, sir?"

Gabe had been thinking about that. "That depends on a lot of things, primarily the status of the antenna. We may have secured the island, but who knows what state the equipment is in. Once the air clears in there, we'll find out. For now, I need to know what shape we're in. Pilots, report."

The sailors had grouped together, standing on the side of the circle closest to Scabbard Cove. When the four pilots glanced at one another, Gabe knew the news would be grim.

"All six CNVs were sunk," Mendez said. A heavy bandage had been wrapped around his right shoulder, and there was a sheen of sweat on the man's forehead, but he seemed otherwise okay.

"All of them?" Gabe asked.

The pilot nodded. "Afraid so." Despite the dashed hopes of all those around him, he managed to keep his voice steady and clear. "One of the Indie frigates must have targeted our patrol craft from the moment we hit the beach. We didn't stand a chance."

"Bastards *wanted* to strand us here," someone said. "If they get a blockade set up, we could be here for months. They'll starve us out just to save some ammo."

"That's not going to happen," Gabe replied. Even as he said the words, though, he realized just how dire their situation now was. His instinct was to keep the concerns to himself until he'd had a chance to think them through, but Blair's mind worked a lot like his, and she preferred to talk things out.

"Sir," she said, "with the patrol boats gone we have no long-range communications capability."

"I know, Sergeant."

"We'll have to wait for Vectes to consider us missing, send a recon—"

"I know, Sergeant." He glanced at her, his glare stopping her more than his words. "Gian?" he called out.

"Sir?" She was next to Mendez, and stepped forward.

"We may have lost the boats, but we might still have an antenna."

Gian raised an eyebrow.

"The one inside the spire. The one we came here for." Gabe rubbed at his stiff neck, just one ache of many after being rocked by artillery twice in two days. He needed to think. He needed coffee.

"Sir," Gian said, "as I understand it, that's a listening post."

"True." He nodded. "But listening doesn't do much good if no one can review the intercepted transmissions, and they weren't planning to do it here. So there's gotta be some kind of broadcasting capability."

"It's a top-secret spec-ops kit, sir," Blair said. "I don't think they'd leave a manual lying around."

"Good thing we have some skilled engineers with us."

"I fix engines," Gian said. "Totally different thing."

"You're an engineer of the COG Navy, and a damned smart one." The woman bit back her protest. More gently he added, "I'm not asking for a miracle, I'm just asking you to go take a look. Who knows, the UIR might have dismantled the thing already. But if not, maybe we can find a way to wire it in to one of our comms and boost the signal."

She looked highly skeptical, but didn't argue.

"We need to determine its status regardless, per the mission objective," he said, "and you're the most qualified to do it. So have a look, will you? The air should be clear enough by now."

Gian nodded, then glanced at her fellow engineers and jerked her chin toward the spire. Five of the six CNV engineers had survived the battle, and they trooped off together, already talking in low voices about how to tackle the task before them. Gabe turned back to the others.

"I don't plan to be on this rock more than a day or two, tops," he said. "So let's cut the chatter about being stranded. Understood?"

They expressed their agreement, some of them loudly, and for the most part seemed to mean it. It was the best he'd get, Gabe knew, and he left it at that.

"Squad leaders, I want half your people to gather what supplies can be found. Ours and the enemies. Be nice to know what we have to work with." He took a breath. "Everyone else should take up defensive positions around the island. Set up shifts, get some shuteye when you're not on watch. We've got three hours until dawn, and I don't want any Indies to land on this rock without us knowing well in advance, is that understood?"

Another chorus of agreement.

"Get to it."

They began to break off into squads, and then separated further once the sergeants or corporals gave them their assignments. Everyone dispersed except the remaining pilots and navigators.

"Problem, sailors?" Gabe asked.

Mendez spoke for them. "We lost our boats," he said. "Our engineers have a job to do, but we weren't sure—"

"You were included in the general orders," Gabe said, then saw the hesitation in their faces. He stepped toward them, and put a hand on Mendez's shoulder. "We're all in this together, and the only way we're going to get off this island is if we act that way."

They shifted.

"Look, maybe I'm nuts, but I'm guessing you all don't want to just sit around here and be protected by a bunch of meat-head grunts. Am I right?" From the way they glanced at him, and one another, Gabe saw that he was indeed correct.

"This," he said, stomping on the ground, "might be the Army's natural habitat, but when the enemy returns they're going to come from the sea, and that's yours. You'll recognize their ships and their tactics long before any Gear would. So join in. Pick up rifles, machetes, or whatever you can find, then embed yourselves with the squads on the perimeter and supplement their watches."

He repeated his instructions into his comm, for all the squad leaders to hear. *"Whatever you might be thinking, don't forget that we just won a battle. The first major skirmish in the Lesser Islands since… I don't know how long it's been. For the moment, at least, Knifespire is a COG island, and until we're told otherwise we're going to defend it like we would any other piece of our land."*

Maybe he was laying it on a bit thick, Gabe thought, but the words seemed to have the desired effect. Mendez saluted him with his good arm. Soon the pilot-navigator pairs were heading off into the darkness, finding Gear squads to join. He left them to it, and went to check on the engineers

in Cathedral Cave.

* * *

"We're up here, sir," a voice called from above.

Gabe stood in the center of the Cathedral, for a moment ignoring the rope ladder that hung down from above. His focus instead locked on the bodies that lay all around him. The scene would give him nightmares, of that he had no doubt. So much blood. So many lives ended in the blink of an eye. People with families, wives, husbands.

"Is the antenna in one piece?" he replied, regaining his composure.

"Seems to be," Gian replied, her voice echoing in the natural chamber.

"Be right there," he said.

Going through the room he closed the eyes of the slain—COG and UIR alike. From the Gears he collected their tags and any personal items he could find, putting them in a backpack. He did the same for the fallen enemy, too, though those items he put in a separate bag, which he left in a dark corner off to one side. Someone would find it, one day. Maybe they'd be grateful, or maybe not. At least he'd done his part.

That grim task finished, he checked the north side of the chamber. Sure enough, the shelling had completely collapsed the narrow passage. They'd done it to stall any pursuit, but they'd also removed the second entrance, leaving only one way in or out. The room would be easier to defend as a result.

It'd also be easier to die in.

Gabe plucked a chunk of dirt from the wall of earth that blocked the tunnel, and rolled it between his fingertips until it crumbled. Scenarios played out in his mind, none of them good.

"Sir?"

Yanked from his train of thought, he let the dirt fall to the floor and turned to see Gian standing behind him.

"What is it, sailor?"

"We've been waiting for you, up there."

"Give me the highlights. Is the antenna usable?"

"It's easier to explain if you come and look."

He followed her back to the rope ladder and, despite his arms being exhausted from the earlier swim and the battle that had followed, Gabe followed her up. By the time they reached the ledge some twenty feet above the chamber floor, his hands and shoulders felt as if they were on fire.

Gian stood next to a rectangular metal box, about two feet to a side and eight high. Other than a small green status light, it was just a slab of gray metal. No logo, no anything.

Only, that wasn't entirely true. When the engineer gestured, Gabe moved around to the back of the device. The metal here had horizontal slats

—cooling vents—and a small cable ran into the lower left corner, snaking off toward the wall of the spire.

"Power?" Gabe asked.

She nodded. "Solar cell is my guess. They've hidden it well, and as far as I know the place is unreachable from the outside."

"What about the box itself? Learn anything?"

"Only that if we try to open it, we'll probably destroy it. Turns out Special Forces don't want their shit being messed with."

Gabe rubbed the back of his neck, thinking.

"Davis," he said into his comm.

"Hmm?" she replied. The sniper sounded half asleep.

"Still with us up there?"

"Yeah. We're here. I was taking a break. What's up?"

"Have a look down the spire from where you are. Spec ops put in a power cell or solar panel somewhere. Can you see it?"

Nearly a minute passed before she replied.

"Yeah, I think so. Thought it was a rock at first, but the shine on it looks too even. It's nestled in a little depression where a few jagged sections of rock meet."

"Can you get to it?"

"Maybe?" Then she added, *"There's a spot on the route I took up here where I could jump to it, I think, but I'd be pretty much stuck there."*

"What if I sent someone with a rope?"

"That would help."

Gian was beside him, a highly skeptical look on her face. "Cutting the power won't do anything about the booby traps, sir. They're chemical—"

"I don't care about the traps," Gabe replied. "We cut the power, it stops transmitting. We turn on the power, it starts again, yes?"

She understood at once. "A distress signal."

"Exactly."

All at once the glum mood on the ledge changed. Gabe ordered two engineers to stay with the box and make sure the power cycling worked. The other three went back down the rope ladder with him, and he ordered them to get some rest.

"It's not going to do me any good if all of you are too tired to stand come morning," he said to Gian.

"Yessir," she replied, saluting. "But first I think we should get these bodies out of the Cathedral."

"It's not sacred ground, sailor."

She frowned at his gallows humor. "It's the best cover we've got, and it's going to stink by noon tomorrow if we don't do something."

Nodding at her logic, Gabe helped them move the bodies. The dead Gears were laid in a row beneath a tree on the northwestern edge of the island. The Gorasni slain were rolled over the low cliff, the weight of their

equipment and armor—that not worth looting, at least—gradually taking them to the bottom, out of sight. By the time they were done with the somber task, Davis had reached the antenna's power supply.

"There's no room to stand here, sir," she reported. *"I can see why they picked this spot. No one would ever think to look here."*

"Are you able to see if the thing is hardwired in, or if it has a switch of some sort?"

"Checking." After a series of grunts and frustrated curses, she finally had an answer. *"There's a switch."*

"Good. Listen up, Davis. You're going to click it on and off in a standard distress pattern. Long, short, long. Got that?"

"For how long? I'm hanging on the side of a rock wall."

"Long as you can, Private."

"Understood."

He left her to the task, and the others to their rest. Back on Gatka Ridge, Gabe began a walk of the island's perimeter. It was a warm night. Moonless, but also clear, and once his eyes adjusted the stars provided all the light he needed to navigate the rocky terrain. There were portions of jungle, but he decided to avoid them until the sun was up. It wouldn't be long.

He visited each group of Gears and sailors, ordering them to sleep in shifts and complimenting, or critiquing, their choice of position.

"High ground is fine, but don't let their spotters see you silhouetted against the sky. Put your backs to a rock, or trees. Anything but sky."

Most had chosen well, though, and it made him proud. Despite serving in a backwater theater of little strategic value, those stationed at Vectes had held their own here. Battled a dug-in enemy and sent them packing.

All it cost us was six patrol boats and as many Gears, he thought. Always that damned devil sitting on one shoulder, pissing on his parade. Gabe almost laughed. It was his nature, he supposed, to never be too happy about anything.

The circuit took an hour, and by the time he returned to the spire at the northern tip of the island he felt dead on his feet. Davis had managed to keep up the SOS signal for forty minutes before the rope lashed around her arm began to cut off circulation to her hand.

"You've done well," he told her. "Rest up. The sun will be over the horizon soon."

Gabe sat next to the entrance to the Cathedral, and leaned back against the rock. He folded his arms across his stomach and let his chin fall to his chest. Sleep found him almost as quickly as the insects.

* * *

It could have been an hour later, or it could have been a second, when the explosion tore him away from his dreams.

8: WITH DAWN COMES THE DEVILS

"South side, south side!"

Gabe scrambled to his feet, bleary-eyed and confused.

"Report!" he growled into his comm. "Anyone!"

Discipline was in shambles. They all started to talk at once, and it was really only the fact that so many were speaking that told Gabe one important piece of information: most, if not all, were still alive.

"Blair, talk to me," he said. "Everyone else shut the hell up."

"An enemy frigate on the south side," she said.

"South? You sure?"

"Damn sure, sir."

It was the last approach anyone would expect them to take, which was of course exactly why they'd done it. Gabe, though, had anticipated something like this. It was why he hadn't amassed his force on the northern part of the island around the spire.

"One frigate, alone?" he asked, taking off at a sprint in that direction.

"Can't say."

He was about to ask why, but his senses were starting to wake up, and Gabe saw the problem immediately. At some point since he'd fallen asleep, which he felt sure had been less than an hour ago, a fog had descended over the island. He could still see from one end to the other, but the ocean beyond was heavily shrouded by a shifting light-gray wall. It seemed to be growing thicker, and closer, by the second. They could see the frigate that was shelling them, but within minutes even that would be obscured.

As he ran toward Blair's position, he thought back through his assessment of the enemy's options, specifically an approach from the south. Of course, the fog! He'd put the chances of an attack from the south in the "unlikely" category because the weather had been clear an hour ago. They

would have had to pass by the entire island to get down there, or gone so far around that a swift response would be impossible. But under the cover of fog, south was the natural choice. He cursed himself for falling asleep, or he would have been more prepared for this.

In many ways the island was a long ramp leading up to the spire itself. Gatka Ridge had a gentle incline from north to south, which meant that while you could shield yourself from approaches out of the east, west, or north, a southerly approach provided a view of almost the entirety of Knifespire. Only the tiny outcrop of rock on the north side, around the base of the spire, would be hidden.

Which meant an enemy frigate could pound every last square foot of Gatka Ridge.

It struck Gabe that he was locked into a mind game of sorts with the enemy officer. That bald bastard he'd seen twice now. This was a chess match—or, more accurately, a tense round of Fractured Lands. Only this time he was playing in the real world, with real lives at stake.

The southern approach made sense for another reason, as well. That was traditionally the COG side of the Lesser Islands, and therefore an unlikely direction to watch for UIR vessels. He glanced up at the spire. It remained untouched, despite being the largest and most prominent landmark. Which meant it was where the enemy wanted him and his troops to go.

"Everyone to the southern tip," Gabe said into his comm. "Now." Then he added, "Engineers in the spire, get to work destroying that listening post. Then join us."

There were replies. Even some arguments. All were drowned out by the full-scale bombardment from that lone UIR ship. Gabe weaved his way down the ridge at a full sprint, over rocks and through patches of jungle, through small streams and, in the very center, across a long, flat open space dominated by tall grass. Explosions tore up the ground around him. Fireballs that burned his cheeks and threw great gouts of soil and debris into the air. Each blast left a fresh crater.

There was no point in trying to dodge the enemy fire. Thanks to the fog they couldn't see him, or anyone else, most likely. This was indiscriminate shelling from an enemy hoping to herd their opponents to a specific place. Given enough time, they could simply reduce the island to rubble. Pulverize the enemy positions before anyone set foot on the ground.

Either way, they win.

A nearby blast threw him to the ground. Gabe heard screaming from somewhere nearby. A Gear in agony. Gut wound, most likely. Smoke filled the air, backed ominously by that ever-encroaching fog.

Lurching to his feet he took a step toward the screaming Gear, but the sound was cut off by another explosion. After a moment's hesitation, Gabe ran on.

Near the southern shore he found Blair and several Gears hunkered

down in a natural trench. He threw himself into the neck-high muddy crevice and ducked down as another artillery shell whistled overhead and exploded in the palm grove just behind their position.

"Why the fuck are we down here?" Blair snarled at him, all decorum gone.

"Because they're expecting us to take shelter in the spire."

"I'm kinda liking that idea right about now."

"Good thing I'm the one giving orders, then." He gripped her upper arm. "Have a little faith, okay? And get ready."

"For what?"

"Them."

Blair was about to say something more, but her words were cut off by a new sound. One Gabe had counted on. The buzz of outboard motors and, more to the point, the sudden lack of shelling.

"They think they've got us bottled up inside the cave," Gabe said into his comm. "We can use that. Wait until they're wading onto the beach." His Gears were smart enough to hold back any reply, as Knifespire went very, very quiet.

The sounds of the small motors dwindled, then died. This was followed seconds later by the rhythmic splashes of soldiers entering the water, and pushing up onto the shore. The beach here, he recalled, was all pebbles and stones. Easier to run quickly on, but also slick, especially in a fog like this.

That fog had closed in now. The Indies had timed their arrival perfectly. In fact, the whole assault had been meticulous, at least so far. Gabe had to give his opponent that much. Now to see how well the asshole dealt with the unexpected. At the first sound of a UIR boot on rock, Gabe spoke quietly into his comm.

"Be ready. Soon as you can see 'em, give 'em hell."

Five seconds passed with nothing but the sound of the enemy troops wading onto shore. Then ten seconds. Gabe tried to count their number in his head, gave up. A lot, that much was obvious.

Somewhere to Gabe's left, a Lancer opened fire.

And then the guns erupted all along the shoreline, from both sides despite the fact that no one could see anyone. They fired at shadows. They fired at a compass heading, for who else but the enemy could be *over there*? Gabe couldn't blame his Gears, but at the same time they were burning through ammo at a terrifying rate.

"Blue squad!" Blair shouted. "Now!"

Her Gears moved in unison, propping their rifles along the edge of the trench and firing at the hazy figures coming up from the water. He joined the fray as if he were one of Blair's own, resting his rifle on the rocks and mud in front of him and squeezing off bursts at anything that moved on the beach before him. Visibility was down to fifty feet now, and still shrinking.

"Davis?" Gabe said into his comm.

"Yessir?"

"Come down off the spire. Not going to be any use to me in this fog."

"It's already burning off," she replied.

"Repeat that?"

"The fog. I'm above it, and I can already see it dissipating from the east."

"Give me a rough estimate. How long will it last?"

"Twenty minutes?"

He pondered that. Did the enemy know it, too? Were they counting on it, even?

"Okay, Davis, stay put. You're our eyes and ears."

"Yes, sir."

A figure emerged from the fog. The UIR guerilla sprinted out of the mist at an astonishing pace, weaving a path with random turns and jukes, as if he could sense the bullets before they came. He leapt at the last second, dodging a shot from Gabe's own rifle, landing in the trench between him and Blair.

Gabe sensed the moment when it would all fall apart. He and Blair both turned, trying to get their rifles around in time. The man in their midst had dropped his own weapon, or perhaps he'd never had one in the first place. Instead he carried a long, serrated combat knife. He slashed at Gabe. A savage swing that hissed through the air between them, missing only because Gabe somehow managed to thrust his midsection backward. The man kicked out in response, and Gabe, off balance, went down onto his back.

His opponent was hit by the butt of Blair's rifle. Not hard, but enough to distract him. He twisted his knife around and jabbed backward. Blair pivoted, the blade cutting through her shirt sleeve and drawing blood. She ignored it. Rotated her Lancer until the sharp side of the bayonet blade faced upward, then thrust in that direction with all her might.

The man lost an arm at the shoulder. The stump fountained blood, splashing on Gabe's boots. But it wasn't his right arm, it was the left. He still had his knife and he brought it down in a wicked stab straight for Blair's throat.

Gabe shot him through the jaw. He dropped the blade, which had punctured Blair's neck—but only just. A shallow wound, Gabe thought. The UIR guerilla fell to the mud, eyes blank.

Blair's hand was at her throat, blood welling in the gaps between her fingers. She glanced down at her palm, then at Gabe.

"Thanks," she said.

"Save it," he replied. "We're still in a world of trouble here."

Fighting raged all around them. The Gorasni were among the Gears. No one was shooting, because no one knew if this shadow or that was friend or foe.

"Squad leaders," he said into his comm. "Keep your Gears tight. Hold positions, don't get spread out."

Some of them answered, but those who did were barely audible over the sounds of combat coming through their microphones.

"Screw this," he said. "Blair? Let's rush the beach. Hit them as they're trying to get out of the water."

She nodded. Her neck was slick with blood, but there was no panic in her eyes. With a few shouted commands she rallied Blue Squad, and they followed Gabe out of the shallow trench.

He ran hard, bent over at the waist. The beach was narrow, and in just a few steps the pebbles became a sucking wet mud. He ran until his feet were submerged. Blair and her Gears fanned out to either side, forming a line.

At that instant another boatload of enemies disgorged into the waves. He heard them long before he saw them. Warriors pushing through the froth, guns held above heads. This was the dreaded moment of a beach landing. Too shallow to duck below the water for cover, but still deep enough to slow progress to a crawl.

"Retreat!" he yelled in their language. One of the few words he knew. His accent was terrible, but all he needed was a second. Maybe two.

The enemy heard his cry, saw the soldiers running toward them, and looked to one another for confirmation this was really happening. *Retreat, already? We haven't even made the shore—*

Maybe they were thinking that. Maybe they were thinking, *Who is this madman?* Gabe didn't care. He got his two seconds, plus a third. Rammed into the closest man with his bayonet. The blade punched through the poor bastard's gut and out his back. Gabe heaved upward, slicing him open from belly to neck.

The one beside him raised her weapon, aimed at Gabe. Too late. One of Blair's Gears dove at her, and the two went down into the water, vanishing in the white froth. They thrashed like sharks fighting over a slab of meat.

The stock of a rifle flew into Gabe's vision. The flat of it took him square in the face. His nose made a crunching sound and he fell, backward, into the water. But it was only six inches deep. The pebbles beneath it like a slap of concrete. He cracked against it and felt the sting as saltwater splashed into his eyes and broken nose.

The Gorasni stood over him. His eyes were wide and full of blind rage. He lifted his gun over his head, still wielding it like a club. The next blow would do a lot more than break Gabe's nose.

There was a thunderclap. The man's hands vanished in a red mist. The gun dropped straight down on his head. The *clunk* sound it made when it hit the man's skull was almost enough to make Gabe laugh. Another thunderclap ripped the air apart, and there was another burst of red mist. This time it was the soldier's head that vanished.

"Now we're even," Blair said, and she ejected the spent shells from a Gnasher she must have picked up since leaving the trench. She levered in a fresh set of shells, and ran off toward the next enemy.

Pushing himself to his feet, Gabe touched the tip of his nose and winced. It stung like hell, but he thought maybe it hadn't broken after all.

Combat roiled on all sides. Bodies in motion. Shouts and screams. Death, of friend and foe alike.

"North side! North side!"

The voice was in Gabe's ear. It was Davis.

"Report," Gabe said, stepping back from the melee, taking a defensive stance.

"Four enemy frigates approaching from the north. Landing craft already in the water!"

"Did you say four?!"

"Yessir!"

Gabe swore under his breath. The enemy's approach from the south had been a solid maneuver, given the fog. The idea that it was just a ruse—to clear the north shore of Knifespire for a full-on invasion—was unexpected. The kind of thing Gabe himself would do.

He glanced around. Only Gears remained around him. Many limping, bleeding. The enemy were all dead, but they were just a distraction, and it had worked.

"We've been played," Gabe said to Blair, but loud enough for them all to hear. "They're landing on the north side. A lot of them. No doubt with the equipment needed to clear that collapsed tunnel." Thinking fast, he tapped his comm. "Davis, retreat. Join us here. Gian, you hear me too? Drop what you're doing and bring everyone from the Cathedral. Now!"

"I have eyes on a frigate captain," Davis replied.

"Leave it. There's no time."

"I'm already out of time, sir."

Somewhere north of them, half a mile away and obscured by fog, came the distinctive report of a Longshot rifle.

"Davis!" he roared into the comm.

"Got him, sir!" There was a glee in her voice that he dreaded to hear. Then another blast from the sniper rifle echoed across the island.

"Damn it, Davis, you're going to—"

—*give your position away*. He didn't say it because it was already too late. The enemy frigates all opened fire at once. A sound like rolling thunder. Even through the fog he could see the fireballs erupt from around the sheer north side of Knifespire. They fired and fired. Explosions boiled over the column of rock. The whole island shook with their force, and still they fired, making sure nothing was left of Davis or her hiding place. Given the narrow, fractured section she'd roosted in, it was something of a miracle that the whole mountain didn't come down.

"Davis? Davis, report!" It was useless. He had to do it anyway. "*Report, goddamnit!*"

The sniper did not reply.

A mixture of anger and guilt burned through Gabe's gut. He'd ordered her to stay put. Her death was his responsibility.

Blair laid a hand on his shoulder. She said nothing, and when Gabe looked at her he could see the finality in her eyes. They were going to die here. There was nowhere to hide save the Cathedral, and even now the enemy would be swarming in there.

"The engineers," someone said. "Did they get out?"

Gabe had shouted for them to leave, too, but in the chaos he realized no response had come back. They'd been placing charges around the listening post, or finding some other way to destroy it. Perhaps they hadn't heard him, or the rock had interfered with the signal. He tried again to raise them on the comm, but heard only static in response.

Dead, or captured.

"We should get in there," Blair was saying. "Maybe we can at least take that damned antenna down with us."

But he wasn't listening. Instead, Gabe turned toward the south, and the open sea. A machine gun's juddering report was echoing across the waves, but it was too distant to be the UIR ship that had deployed the soldiers here. The tone, the pace, was wrong too. That was a rotary cannon.

"Sir, if we—"

"Shhh." He held up a hand. All the Gears around him fell silent. "That's one of ours. Maybe we still have a chance."

The gun fired several long bursts, and another joined it. Then a third. He heard the engines of the UIR ship ramp up to full. It sped off. Hard to tell directions in the fog, even diminished as it was, but he thought they were retreating to the northeast.

A minute passed. The guns died down, replaced by the familiar tone of the COG patrol boat's twin diesel engines. Gabe saw the craft just seconds later. They turned sidelong.

"Oh, hell," he whispered.

The boats were not full of Gears, as he'd hoped. Each carried a three-person crew, and only two or three soldiers instead of the maximum ten. This wasn't reinforcements, it was an evacuation.

"Everyone to the south beach, now," he ordered into his comm. "On the double." Then, to Blair, "Cover them, then we go."

She nodded. "Blue Squad, spread out!"

The Gears—those still standing—moved apart and knelt in the shin-high waves. Davis's earlier report had been correct. The fog was clearing, and quickly. Soon it would offer no protection for a retreat.

"C'mon," Gabe muttered. "C'mon."

Orange Squad arrived first. The half that had survived, anyway. Gabe looked each of them in the eye as they filed past, heading out toward the patrol boats bobbing in the waves. He alone had led them here. He alone bore the responsibility for those who'd fallen. As he met each Gear's eyes he

tried to convey that.

When the last squad left the beach, he ordered Blair to take her people to the patrol boats.

"What about you?"

He slapped his last magazine of ammo into the Lancer, and looked toward the spire.

"I have to make sure the mission succeeds. Besides, our engineers are still up there."

"They're gone, LC. You know they are."

"Maybe," he said. "Maybe they're captured."

"I'm not sure the Gorasni play by those rules."

He sighed. "I have to try, Blair. Get to the boat. That's an order."

"We'll come with you."

Gabe glanced at her, now. Then at the Gears behind her. They'd closed ranks again, and were listening. Not a single one of them made any move to leave.

He shook his head. "Any minute now those frigates will swoop around to cut off our retreat. Our patrol boats won't stand a chance. You've got to go, get the wounded to base, get—"

Blair wasn't looking at him, he realized. Her gaze had swiveled past him, and as this realization came she pushed in front of Gabe, bringing her weapon up. Shielding him.

The Gears were readying weapons, too.

Gabe turned, saw figures moving in the trees, just hidden in the last dregs of fog. Then one emerged.

"Hold fire," he said to Blair.

Gian stumbled out of the trees, holding her arm. Her uniform had burned away there, up to the elbow, and the skin was badly singed. A gash across her forehead streaked blood down her face. Judging from the way it smeared across her brow and cheeks, she'd tried and failed to swipe it away.

He ran to her, caught her as she tripped. The woman cried out when he gripped her left arm to hold her up. Instantly he shifted his leverage to her right arm, which he pulled over his own shoulder.

"The roof came down on us," she said, almost as if to herself. There was a distance, and a disbelief, in her tone.

"Is anyone else alive back there?"

Gian shook her head, though there was little conviction in it. "I snuck away," she said. "They were… they were bayoneting anyone who was still moving. Anyone not crushed."

"Mendez?"

Without looking at him, she shook her head. Mendez was gone.

A rage boiled up in Gabe, but he battled it back. Revenge wouldn't matter if he lost any more of his division today. He thought of asking her about the antenna, but could see the dazed look in her eyes and decided not

to press. Her answer wouldn't change anything, anyway. It was time to leave.

"Let's get you to a boat. Take care of those burns."

Somehow she managed to nod. Somehow she still put one foot in front of the other.

* * *

When Gabe finally crawled over the gunwale of the last patrol boat, he was greeted by Wyatt's frowning face.

"The hell are you doing here?" Gabe said, and despite everything that had happened he found himself grinning.

"Got your signal," his brother said.

"There, see, Gian?" Gabe said to the wounded engineer. "Told you it would work."

"You never said it would work," she replied, wincing as someone pressed a burn pad to her arm. Gabe nodded at her, conceding the point. He forced the smile from his face, too, upon realizing how it must make her feel. She'd just lost her pilot, Mendez, along with many others. Her signal may have worked, but an awful price had still been paid.

Gabe looked back to his brother.

"Was sort of hoping you'd bring the cavalry."

"Phillips ordered us to stay put until you'd officially missed your return window. Said the distress call was an Indie trap."

"You disobeyed a direct order?"

"Unless it comes from Hoffman, I usually do—and even when it does, I've gotten pretty good at creative interpretation."

"You've always been good at that."

"That's the difference between me and Oscar. I was always an 'ask for forgiveness' kind of guy."

"Funny. I don't remember you ever asking for forgiveness. Or anything else, for that matter."

"I'm saving up. Anyway, you rescued us last time. Me and my Ghosts figured it was time to return the favor." Then he glanced up at the island, specifically the spire at the north end. "We can't leave just yet, though. What's the status in that cave?"

He meant, of course, the secret antenna.

Gabe looked to Gian, who stared back at him blankly for several seconds. Then it was as if a light had been turned on behind her eyes, as she suddenly realized what Wyatt was asking. Numbly, she pulled a small device from her shirt pocket, stared at it for a moment, then flipped the safety cover up, revealing its single red button.

Closing her eyes, she pressed it.

There was a deep *whump* sound from the north. Seconds later, smoke began to billow out of Knifespire.

"That's the status in that fucking cave," the woman muttered.

Gabe eyed his brother. "Mission accomplished?"

Wyatt nodded. "Good enough for me. Well done."

Suddenly exhausted, Gabe lowered himself to the deck and leaned back. He rapped his fist against the hull.

"Take us home," he said.

The boat's engines thrummed to life, and they started to power through the waves.

9: AN ALTERNATIVE TO THINKING

Right away Gabe knew there was a problem.

A part of him—a large part—wanted to pretend the sputtering coughs from the big diesel engine weren't happening. As if by sheer force of imagination he could make the problem go away.

"Something's wrong," the pilot said.

"Now what?"

Wyatt went to the console and stood behind the man, studying the instrument panel. After a quick glance he turned and ran aft, dodging the resting and wounded Gears who were sprawled out on the deck, and looked into the water behind them.

"We're leaking oil. Or fuel. Maybe both."

"Took a lot of fire from the enemy buses," the navigator said. "Would've been a lot worse without the fog."

The vibration from the engine faltered. "Ease off," Gabe said to the pilot. The man had a hand over his ear, listening.

"CNV *Domino* took a hit to the engine as well, and CNV *Mighty* is taking on water."

All three rescue boats were in trouble.

"Anyone else starting to think that island is cursed?" someone asked.

"Quiet, everyone. I need to think," Gabe said. "Pilot, ease off."

The pilot's hand went to the throttle, but was stayed by what the navigator said next. Two simple words that filled Gabe with a whole new level of dread.

"They're pursuing." Then, after studying his panel, "Two frigates. Maybe three. This fog is messing with our readings."

With an effort, Gabe pushed to his feet and crossed to the console. He glanced at the radar and the blobs of shifting green that represented the

enemy boats.

"I need a map."

The man pushed to one side, giving Gabe a better view of the laminated charts he kept beside his gauges.

"We're here," he said, pointing.

Gabe glanced ahead, and saw nothing but fog. It had been starting to clear around Knifespire, but back out on the water it was thick again. Twenty feet of visibility, tops.

"Full speed," Gabe said.

"But—"

"It's Stewart, yes?" Gabe said.

The use of the name tripped the pilot up. "I'm Graham, sir. Stewart helms the *Mighty*."

"Yes, of course. Graham, we haven't had the pleasure of sailing together, so I'll only say this once. Everyone under my command is skilled as hell and a lot smarter than me. I let you all do your jobs because you're a lot better at them than I am. In exchange, when I *do* give an order, I need it to be followed." He stabbed a finger at the map. "So make for Adena, all possible speed. Tell me when we're… *here*. And let the others know."

The navigator and pilot exchanged a glance, then did as ordered.

When Gabe turned back around, Wyatt was beside him.

"You know what you're doing?"

"Rarely," Gabe said.

"But you have a plan of some sort, yes? You always have a plan."

Gabe nodded, his gaze off the port bow. "I saw a light earlier."

"Brother," Wyatt said, "that does not fill me with a lot of confidence."

* * *

Half a mile from Adena's shore, the *Mighty* began to sink.

"Pull alongside," Gabe shouted across the water to the pilot of the *Domino*. "We'll split the survivors between us!" It would be tough to squeeze anyone else aboard the remaining boats, but what choice was there?

He got a thumbs up in response, or thought he did. Even twenty feet apart he had trouble seeing the other boat, much less the hand signals of her crew. He went to work moving those in his boat to make room. It was going to be crowded, but there was no other choice.

They took turns pulling sailors over the rail. He and Wyatt worked together to heave the Gears with their heavy armor on board.

Someone tapped his shoulder.

Gabe turned to see his navigator. The man put a finger to his lips, and pointed at the radar.

A quarter-mile behind them, three green blobs were moving from left to right.

"Kill the engines," Gabe said at once, then cupped his hands and said the same to the other boat, now just ten feet off their starboard. "Wyatt, get the oars from under the bench."

"You're joking."

"I'm not. We've only got a bit of fuel left, and we're going to need it later for this to work. Besides, it'll be the noise we're making that leads them to us. We row the rest of the way."

Wyatt seemed on the verge of creatively interpreting the order, but finally shrugged and went to fetch the oars.

They took turns, four rowing at a time. The *Domino* kept pace, but Gabe noticed they never switched rowers and he wondered how many aboard were wounded.

No one said anything. There was only the sound of the oar blades dipping into the waves, then back out again. Even that might be too much, but there was nothing to be done about it. They had to get to shore before the fog lifted. Even a partial lifting would give those UIR ships a clear radar view of the much smaller COG patrol boats. He meant to be hidden by the land before that could happen. Force them to have to wait for a visual search.

They weren't as far south as he'd hoped, but when the tree-lined shore of Adena finally emerged from the fog he didn't really care. It was land, and Adena was a much bigger place than Knifespire.

"Everyone ashore," he said.

"What about our ships?" Graham asked.

"Aim them west and set them on autopilot."

"So that's why you wanted to save the last of the fuel," Wyatt commented. "Let the Gorasni chase them to the horizon if they want. Damn, that's smart. Gabe Diaz, always thinking ahead."

They all knew the boats didn't have enough fuel for what Wyatt envisioned, but Graham nodded all the same and went to work. Once everyone had disembarked, Gabe remained on board long enough to fire up the engine again and ramp it to full power, pointed west. Graham's counterpart, Stewart, did the same with the CNV *Domino*.

Once the boat started building up speed, Gabe dove from her starboard rail and swam ashore.

Minutes later he sat on the beach, stinking of seaweed, watching his last two craft vanish into the fog. Everything hurt, but at least they were out of the water.

"Well," Wyatt said, "you either just sent them on the best wild goose chase ever, or drew a line right to us."

He glanced at his brother, and shrugged. "The boats will run out of fuel soon, and start to drift. My hope is the enemy will waste time approaching, boarding, and searching."

"Still, I don't think sitting on this beach is the smartest idea you've ever

had."

"Wasn't planning to hang around long," Gabe said. To either side of him, Gears and sailors alike were lying in the sand, catching their breath after the journey or tending to wounds. Both, in most cases.

"You okay, brother?" Wyatt asked.

"Thinking about all the people we lost on that fucking rock," he admitted. Davis, Mendez, and so many others.

Wyatt took a seat in the sand beside him. "I've always looked up to you. Oscar, as well. Never once in my life have I felt like I knew something you two didn't."

Despite himself, Gabe glanced at the younger man, and waited. "

In my career in Spec Ops, I've been through a lot of nasty battles. Lost a lot of friends."

"I have, too," Gabe admitted. "Lost too many friends."

"Which is one of the reasons I don't bother making them anymore."

"Right. A fine excuse," Gabe said, unable to stop himself.

"Yeah, well… what I'm trying to say is, the time to think about those who've died is later."

"How much later? That's why they posted me here in these islands, you know. To get my thinking done, to get past it. So when is later, exactly?"

Wyatt glanced at him, surprised. "You're not listening. It's *later*. Always *later*. Never now."

Gabe lowered his head and chuckled, wryly. "Wyatt, that is the worst goddamn advice I've ever heard."

His brother heaved his shoulders in an exaggerated shrug. "It works for me." He pulled a small silver flask from somewhere. Unscrewed the cap and took a swallow, then handed it to Gabe.

"What is it?"

"An alternative to thinking."

Gabe took a swig. He should have expected the moonshine. Could practically taste the bathtub it was no doubt concocted in, but he swallowed it all the same and let the burn in his throat and stomach spread until it reached his brain.

He handed the flask back. Wyatt took it and handed it to a nearby Gear.

"Pass it around," he said.

The woman took it gratefully, drank, passed it on.

For what felt like a long time the world seemed to stand still. There was only the sound of waves breaking on the shore, and the palm trees stirred by the occasional shift in the wind. Gabe lay back and stared at the sky. Or, rather, the fog, but there was a hazy white now where the sun would be. Soon it would burn through, and the day would get hot. Hot, and crystal clear.

"Do you hear that?" Wyatt asked.

Gabe sat up, and listened. "No?"

"Shh," his brother said, and then he pointed. "There. Hear it?"

Other soldiers sat up now, or even stood, and all looked toward the northwest.

Gabe heard it then. The sound of a UIR frigate engine running just above idle. He waved his arms in the air to get his people's attention. Holding a finger to his lips, he gestured with his Lancer toward the palm trees.

They all moved at once, slow and silent, following Wyatt's lead. His Ghosts, being in the best condition physically, carried the bulk of their supplies. Gabe helped Gian up by her good arm, and the two of them brought up the rear.

Wyatt led them fifty feet into the jungle, up until the point that the sandy ground gave way to lumpy dirt littered with dry, dead palm fronds. The brittle foliage crunched so loudly underfoot that he dared go no farther. So Wyatt waved to the left and right, and then motioned downward.

Spread out and get behind cover.

The group complied. All of them knew they were still vulnerable to shelling here. Most of them knew that UIR frigates were equipped with sophisticated listening equipment, along with their radar, and that even a simple cough could be heard from many miles away provided the microphone was aimed at you.

Someone would be on deck right now, sweeping the conical device in slow circles, a set of heavy headphones tight on their ears, ready to call out the slightest sound. Of that Gabe had no doubt.

The sun broke through in a sudden explosion of warmth and light. With it the jungle collectively came alive. Birds and lizards and who-knew-what-else began to chatter and call.

That's good, Gabe thought. *Sonic camouflage.*

A bead of sweat snaked a path down his back. Tiny red ants began to race up his arm in erratic lines. He ignored them until one bit him. He switched from ignoring then to staring at the little bastard, mentally warning it of the crushing flat-handed strike he planned to deliver as soon as the enemy boat passed by.

And it did pass by. He saw hints of it through the trees. Though the fog had cleared overhead, it still clung like a hazy curtain just offshore. The frigate couldn't come in close enough to get a visual, not without risking a tangle with the rocks and reefs that surrounded Adena. Still he could make out its vague form. They were going slow, but not drifting. The patter of its engines still rolled in over the water. Even and low, but there.

Then the note changed. They rumbled up to full power, and for a split second Gabe thought they were turning toward him, reefs be damned, and the shelling would begin. He pivoted, ready to run inland, but though the engines were pushed to maximum, the sound started fading. They were moving out to sea.

"Your trick worked," Wyatt said, as the sound all but vanished. "With any luck they'll chase 'em halfway across the Serano."

"Not nearly enough fuel."

"Current's strong out there," Graham offered. "Southerly, but strong. We might have bought ourselves a few hours."

"I'll take whatever we can get," Gabe said. He raised his voice a little. "Everyone stay sharp. I don't know how long it will take, but they'll be back."

Wyatt raised a hand. "What's the plan, LC?"

For a second Gabe considered reversing the leadership role here. It was, after all, Special Forces that had started this mess, and it would be nice to see Wyatt and his team take some responsibility for once. Then he discarded the thought as quickly as it had come. Taking responsibility was not one of his brother's strong suits.

"I saw a light near the southern tip of the island, on our way out here. The day before that we saw some fishing boats anchored on the eastern side down there. A village."

They grew shifty at this, which Gabe expected. "I know, I know. We've had run-ins with these people before. They don't take sides, don't help. Don't care about our war, but we need to pass through there to get to the southmost point. From there we wait for evac. I've no idea how long it will take, but Phillips will send someone to come get us."

"Hopefully before those Gorasni do the same," Blair said. Her tone was more pissed-off than concerned, but Gabe let it go. He pointed south.

"Let's move out. Wyatt, you want to take point?"

"I'd rather scout ahead. By myself."

"Yeah, for some reason that idea worries me."

"C'mon, you don't trust me? On second thought, don't answer that. How about us Ghosts bring up the rear, make sure we're not being tracked by any Indie scouts?"

Blair stepped forward. "I'll take point, sir."

Gabe nodded. "Lead on, then. If you spot any locals, play the diplomatic card. Wyatt, since you don't have a diplomatic card in your deck, how about just avoiding the locals?"

"With pleasure," he replied, and he set off without another word, vanishing among the rest of the group toward the back of the line. Whatever Gabe might think about his wayward little brother, he sure made a hell of a good Ghost.

"Move out," Gabe said to no one in particular.

10: FIRST IMPRESSIONS

"I'm not sure what's worse," someone said, "the heat or the damned insects."

A debate arguing the miserable merits of both ensued. Gabe decided against ordering a stop to the thinly disguised complaints. Sometimes letting people vent was better in the long run. So he tuned the conversation out, and instead moved up and down the column, checking on those who'd been wounded.

Of them, Gian had the most serious injuries. The burns on her arm were extensive, and the gash on her forehead would need stitches, of that Gabe felt sure.

"If you need to stop, just say so," he told her. "I can have a few of Blue Squad stay with you, and we'll send someone back once evac arrives."

She only shook her head, and kept going, as determined as ever not to slow down the march. Graham appeared at Gabe's side.

"She was with all her fellow engineers when that cave collapsed," he said. Gabe glanced at him. The man hadn't been on Knifespire, but Gabe had heard him talking to those who were. He seemed to have a knack for getting stories out of people, and a sincere interest in what they said.

"Your point, sailor?"

The man glanced forward. Gian was twenty paces ahead now, ducking under a vine.

"I've been stationed at Vectes for sixteen years," he said. "Seen just about everything. Been a long time since we had losses like you guys endured on that island, but it's not unprecedented. Gian's in shock, which is natural, but that still means you need to keep a close eye on her. How she deals with that shock could go any number of ways."

"Sounds like you have some experience."

He shrugged. “Did a stint in Psy-Ops, analyzing the effectiveness of all the fucked-up techniques they use to get intel from Indie prisoners. Trust me, shock is the lowest rung on that ladder.”

“Interesting career path. How’d you end up here?”

Another shrug. “Couldn’t take it anymore, so I just… asked.”

Gabe tried to imagine doing such a thing, and found to his surprise that he could. A clean slate. A new beginning. The idea held definite appeal. Dangerously so. He put the fantasy out of his mind as quickly as it had come to him. There were more pressing matters.

“Thanks, Graham. I’ll keep an eye on her.”

* * *

Blair led them east.

Where Knifespire was a long, thin sliver of an island, Adena was shaped more like a bean. Two roughly circular masses of land that merged in the center. The whole thing was tipped at a forty-five-degree angle when viewed on the map, with the north “bulb” leaning west, and the south to the east. Draw a line through them, Gabe realized, and you’d hit Knifespire in one direction, Vectes in the other.

Graham’s navigator, a burly man called Kabir who wore a perpetual smile, had found the presence of mind to grab his laminated map of the Lesser Islands before sending his boat away. Unfortunately the map was of the entire island chain, of which Adena was such a small part it could be covered up with a thumb. The cartographer had only bothered to note three things on the bean: a marker denoting a maximum elevation of just over two hundred feet, a shallow bay at the southernmost point called—unimaginatively—Shallow Bay, and a single river that flowed in a meandering path from near the highest elevation point down to a spot on the shore which the map named Blind Falls.

“Gotta wonder how bored a mapmaker has to be, when they run out of friends’ names for places on a chart,” Gabe said.

“I don’t mind so much,” Kabir replied, grinning. “It tells me something about the place. ‘Kabir’s Bay’ would mean nothing, but ‘Shallow’? That helps.”

Gabe handed him the map. “I’d guess Kabir’s Bay would be a pretty happy place.”

“Only because you know me,” the man replied. “If it said, ‘Parson’s Cove,’ you’d know nothing but a name.”

“Fair point.”

Kabir folded the map and tucked it into his uniform, then rejoined Graham toward the back of the line.

The path Blair forged was rough at first. Straight through dense jungle. Even from fifty feet back, Gabe could hear her machete scything through

the undergrowth, but there was nothing to be done about it. They had to get away from the shore, and her path, he realized, was leading them toward the island's only river.

He started walking faster, intending to catch up with her. The increased pace wasn't necessary, though, as just a minute later her efforts to clear branches came to an end. So did her march.

Blair was standing still amid the undergrowth, slightly crouched, a fist held up indicating "stop." The Gears behind her fanned out, behind cover, their Lancers raised and ready. Gabe worked his way up to her, his eyes scanning the dense foliage ahead.

He saw nothing, though.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Shh…" Then she pointed.

Gabe traced a line from her fingertip into the undergrowth. From the tension in the air, he half expected to see a hidden Gorasni outpost, or even some ancient ruins hidden beneath thick vines.

What he saw instead was the face of a child.

The girl was maybe a hundred feet away, standing stone still beside a flowering plant. Her face was smeared with dirt, her dark eyes wide as saucers. She stared at Gabe, and he stared back.

"What do we do?" Blair asked.

The question surprised Gabe. There seemed only one choice. So he stood, stepped forward, and waved.

"Hello!" he called out, going for friendly but not quite achieving it.

The little girl turned and ran. In barely the span of a second she was gone, vanished into the jungle.

"Nice one," Blair said. "Do we go after her?"

"What are you going to do, tackle her? She was, what, ten years old?"

Blair shrugged. "She might alert someone. Start shouting. Who knows?"

"It's a risk we'll have to take, Sergeant. We're not going to be able to keep up with her. You saw how quickly she moved."

"Like a rabbit."

"Exactly." He gestured in the direction the girl had gone. "She'll go find adults, and tell them she saw soldiers in the forest. That one of them waved. I think that's better than saying she was chased and hunted."

Blair conceded the point, but still looked ill at ease.

"What she *did* do," Gabe added, "was draw us a path to the rest of them. Be it a camp or just a village, we can find them now."

"Do we *want* to find them?"

It was a good question. "Avoiding the locals seems like the smart play," he replied, "especially if they continue their tradition of ignoring the war. On the other hand, they've probably never had an incursion onto their shore before. Who knows how they'll react?"

"If that kid was any indication, scared shitless."

Gabe chuckled. She was right, of course.

"Well, let's hope the rest of them aren't children."

* * *

The sound of gently burbling water became noticeable just fifteen minutes later, and soon after that Blair found the river. At this point, though, it was more of a stream. Ten feet across and only a few deep. It was crystal clear and flowing steadily, though, and that was all Gabe cared about.

"Ten-minute break," he told the group. "Fill your canteens and stay in the shade."

The temperature continued to climb, and any respite provided by the jungle canopy quickly vanished. Instead of providing shade, the trees seemed to hold in the heat and insects.

Everyone had red marks on their arms where mosquitos had been smashed while halfway through a meal. But it was the relentless ants that Gabe wanted to annihilate with every fiber of his being. The slightest hesitation would give them their chance, and in seconds they'd be scurrying up his leg or crawling deep into his combat boots. Any attempt to dissuade them just earned a stinging bite.

"I'd almost rather face the Gorasni than these little shits," he said, kneeling and moving one off his pant leg with the tip of his Lancer. He deposited the little monster on a leaf, and toyed briefly with the idea of skewering it on his Lancer's bayonet.

"Smear some palm oil on your skin and they'll leave you alone," someone said. Gabe grunted, at first thinking the comment was the beginning of a prank, but he quickly realized it had been made with all seriousness. He realized something else, too.

Whoever had said it wasn't part of their group.

Everyone went quiet, and stared just over Gabe's shoulder.

He turned and saw a man standing behind them.

An old man, but not old enough to need the cane he grasped with one hand. His hair was long, black, and almost ridiculously clean given their surroundings. A monkey lay across his shoulders, its keen little eyes staring out from beneath the lustrous hair. What Gabe noticed most was how amazingly calm the man seemed to be, given that he'd just come upon a group of armed soldiers in the middle of his island.

There wasn't any amusement, though, on the man's deeply tanned and wizened features. No, Gabe thought the expression was more like apathy.

"Thank you," he replied finally. "I'll try that."

There was a brief moment when he thought that might be the end to the encounter. That the man would simply turn and walk back into the jungle, never to be seen again. But he stepped forward.

Guns were raised.

"Woah," Gabe said quickly. "Everyone, relax. We're guests here. Got that?"

The Gears around him replied by lowering their weapons… marginally.

Gabe stood and regarded the native. He wore threadbare clothes, second or third hand, but of a modern style. No shoes, though. None were needed, given how calloused his feet seemed to be. A stark contrast to the lustrous and well-combed head of hair.

"We're trespassing," Gabe said. "I'm sorry about that. Our boats were fired on and—"

"We heard the thunder," the man replied. Then he glanced around at the rest of the soldiers, as if seeing them for the first time. "Some of you are wounded."

Gabe nodded.

The man did, too. "We have no doctor," he said without a hint of apology. "In fact, we have nothing at all. For you," his eyes then darted north, "or for them."

"They don't want to take sides," Blair muttered from behind him, just loud enough for Gabe to hear. He waved her off.

"We just want to get to Shallow Bay," Gabe said to the man. "Our boats will pick us up there, and we'll be off your island."

Some quick calculations went on behind the man's eyes. He glanced around, as if adjusting his mental equations, and Gabe couldn't help but wonder what the parameters were. He hoped the overriding factor would be getting these strangers off the island as quickly as possible, lest the enemy think the islanders had aided them. Helping these Gears might upset a carefully curated neutrality that had been built up over decades. *Not* helping them might mean they stayed longer—or worse, set up a base.

"I will show you the way," the man said. Without waiting for a reply, he turned and walked off into the trees, his pace casual.

Gabe watched him for a beat. Then he turned to his troops.

"Break's over, I guess."

No one complained.

* * *

Through nothing but eye contact, Gabe informed Blair that he'd take point now. After a few minutes he caught up to their guide.

"Name's Diaz, by the way. Lieutenant Colonel Gabriel Diaz." He held out a hand, not quite sure why he was introducing himself, but somehow feeling it was the right thing to do. Goodwill and all that.

The man glanced at Gabe's hand, hesitated, then took it.

"Ciprian," he said, "but everyone calls me Cipi."

Gabe had met only a few islanders, beyond those that lived around Vectes, and was surprised at how thin the man's accent was. Many of those

with whom he'd spoken were nearly incomprehensible.

"You weren't born here."

Cipi took the comment with a sigh. "No, I only arrived about six years ago."

"What brought you here, of all places?" Gabe realized how that had to sound, but before he could explain, Cipi replied.

"The war did," he said. There was no malice in it, just a statement of fact. "My island was too close to the fighting. I did not like the sound of the guns. So I went west, and found this place. It's… peaceful." This last he couldn't help but deliver with a heavy note of worry.

"I'm sorry we've intruded," Gabe said. "It is not our intention to bring our conflict here."

Cipi waved the comment away as if it were a bad smell. "The Serano sometimes washes the world onto our shores, and it would be foolish to let ourselves be surprised by it. Unfortunately, most of the others here feel differently."

The sentiment surprised Gabe. It was refreshingly pragmatic for an islander, at least amongst those Gabe had met in his time here.

"Come," Cipi said, gesturing to a break in the trees. They were following the stream, but at a sharp bend that took the river northeast, he pushed a branch aside and started down a trail wide enough for two persons to move side-by-side. It was well worn, with fresh footprints, including those of a child. Perhaps the one they'd seen earlier, Gabe thought. The amount of travel implied that the stream was where they got their fresh water.

After several hundred yards the track widened and small, thatch-roofed buildings came into view. It wasn't that the area had been cleared first, and then built upon, as Gabe had seen the COG do for dozens of outposts. Rather, the locals had made use of the natural contours and intricacies of the landscape. Homes were single-room structures, often incorporating a large tree trunk into their design. No attempt had been made to build them on level ground, or beside one another. Instead they were scattered like leaves across a low hill, some facing east and others west.

The incorporation of the natural landscape made the structures very hard to see from the water. Gabe thought maybe Special Forces could learn a thing or two from such a place, or have these people build their next secret listening post. The homes and buildings here were hidden in plain sight.

"Which one of these is yours?" Gabe asked their guide, casually.

The man gestured vaguely toward the west. "Up on the hill there. It's not much, but it's mine."

Gabe glanced in that direction. The small hut was just visible through the trees. It was the only one, in fact, on the western-facing side of the village, and perched up on a hill above the rest. Instantly, Gabe realized it must be the same hut in which he'd spotted a candle burning. It was the only one with a window facing the right way, and high enough.

So it had been Ciprian who'd disregarded the village's blackout. Why?

"Nice place," Gabe said finally.

Cipi seemed not to notice, or care, what Gabe thought of his hut, or indeed the village itself. He kept to the outskirts, and other than the occasional glimpse of someone through the trees, Gabe saw no one else.

"We could use some food," Blair said from behind him. "If they won't give it to us, maybe they'll barter for it."

Gabe glanced back and saw not just her expression, but those of the surviving Gears and sailors spread out in a loose line behind her. Their faces were gaunt, exhausted, but there was still that determination—which he also felt.

"Cipi?" Gabe asked.

The man had walked on, not hearing Blair's comment, or maybe choosing to ignore it. Now he turned and raised his eyebrows, waiting.

"I know you said you have nothing to share with us," Gabe said, "but it may be some time before our base can send ships to take us off your island. Perhaps we could trade with you for some food. Is that possible?"

"No!"

It wasn't Cipi who spoke the sharp word, but an old woman who had emerged from one of the huts. Her skin was so wrinkled Gabe couldn't see her eyes in the narrow slits they occupied. Her gray hair was wiry and poked out in all directions from beneath a wide, frayed hat.

Cipi demurred instantly to her. Some kind of village elder, or matriarch, Gabe decided. She spoke in rapid, angry bursts aimed at Cipi, using the guttural language of the islands, an offshoot of the Gorasni tongue. He kept his head lowered the entire time, as if he was a child being admonished for neglecting some chore.

After she'd said her piece, Cipi made only a single word reply. She turned and vanished back inside her hut, slamming the door behind her. The whole structure shook with the force of it.

"What did she say?"

Cipi took a breath and let it out, slowly.

"She is angry that I've helped you, and wishes you to be gone from here."

"Because you can't be seen to help one side over the other?"

To Gabe's surprise, it took Ciprian some time to answer. The man chose his words carefully.

"That, yes, but something else, too. There was a murder here," the man said, "about two months ago. A boy was stabbed. Gutted, in fact."

Gabe frowned. "I'm sorry to hear that."

Cipi nodded. "Someone said they saw a dark figure with glowing green eyes in the forest, that same evening. Holding a knife like the ones you wear at your belts."

Unable to stop himself, Gabe's hand went to the hilt of his blade,

making sure it was still there. All the Gears carried them, and instantly he realized what the sight of such a display would look like to the matriarch, given what had happened. Then the other part of Cipi's comment registered.

"Glowing green eyes?"

"We are not as simple and superstitious as you might think," Cipi said quickly. "This was not some forest demon. It was a soldier, with… night-vision goggles? I believe that is your term."

"It is." He didn't like where this was going. Only the day before he'd borrowed six of the devices from the Ghosts, to aid in his attempt to retake Knifespire. He had no idea which Gears still carried them, if any.

But Cipi had said the incident occurred months ago. Well before the Ghosts had arrived at Vectes. Moreover, the COG's version of the goggles had a reddish hue, not green. Something else was going on here. "I assure you we had nothing to do with that. Our policy is to keep to the waters, save for our base at Vectes."

"Yet you are here," Cipi observed.

"That wasn't by choice."

Gabe said the words though he knew they weren't exactly true. Hiding on Adena had been the only option left to him, but it was still an option he'd chosen—and besides, none of this would have happened if Wyatt and his team had stayed off Knifespire.

Speaking of Wyatt, is he still with us, or did he decide to slip away? In the heat and the monotony of the hike, Gabe had almost forgotten about him. Almost. With a glance over his shoulder, Gabe quickly scanned the faces of the rest of the group. Wyatt was there, at the rear, just as he'd said he'd be. Behaving, for once. Gabe studied him for a moment.

He wondered if Wyatt, or any member of the group, had looted a pair of UIR goggles. Gabe hoped to hell the answer was no. Now wasn't the time to ask.

Suddenly the woman emerged again from her small hut. Despite the heat, she'd put on a shawl. Pausing only to give a long, hard glance at Cipi, she turned and marched off down a trail leading east.

"We should keep moving," their guide said, once she'd gone. "You will have to find your own food."

"Where's she going?" Gabe asked, not liking the tone in the man's voice.

"She wishes you to leave," he repeated, "and I fear she has gone to gather enough of our people to make sure that happens."

"Good luck with that," Blair said, hefting her rifle. Gabe put a hand on her arm and forced the weapon down.

"Everyone stay calm. They don't want our war on their shores, and that's their right. We'll head to Shallow Bay and…"

He trailed off, a feeling growing in him that his plan wasn't going to work. How long would it take for Phillips to send more boats after them? She'd already be fuming over the three Wyatt took, against her orders, and

when those didn't come back, a very serious situation would be crashing down on her shoulders. Exactly the kind of scenario she dreaded, and worked so hard to avoid.

"Listen," he said to the group. "One step at a time, okay? The cove, then food, and a way to signal base. That's what we've got to do right now."

Blair studied him for a long second, then lifted her chin. "You heard the LC. Saddle up, Gears, we've got a bit farther to go."

Cipi turned, then, and walked due south. The trail here was narrow and disused, much of it already reclaimed by the relentless jungle growth. He avoided the village now, Gabe realized, and wondered if he would be in trouble for bringing outsiders there in the first place.

Gabe motioned for his Gears to follow the man, and waited until all but Wyatt had passed.

His brother eyed him. "Something wrong?"

"Yeah," Gabe said. "I'm just not sure what. Keep an eye on our guide, will you?"

"What, you think he's going to gather some fishermen and ambush us or something? We can handle—"

"I don't know, Wyatt. Maybe it's nothing. I just want you to keep an eye on him."

The man nodded. "Sure. No problem."

The march dragged on, a monotonous trudge under foliage, over vines, and through muddy patches where the air itself seemed alive with all the insects. Just when it seemed like the journey would never end, Cipi pushed a branch aside and walked out onto one of the finest beaches Gabe had ever seen. The sand here was nearly white, unmarred by seaweed or even a single pebble. Two-foot-high waves crashed along the shore, save for the semicircular inlet at the center.

"Shallow Bay," Gabe said.

Cipi nodded. He seemed, in fact, unimpressed. Gabe wondered how long he'd have to be near a paradise like this to think it mundane. The waters were jade green, alive with schools of small colorful fish that darted and swarmed.

"Before you ask," Cipi said, gesturing toward the water, "the fish are poisonous. You must go out a mile or more to find bass or mothfish."

"Any chance you have a boat we can borrow?" Blair asked him. "Some poles and bait?" The man shook his head, wrapping his fingers around his cane. He seemed at once both anxious to leave, and hesitant to.

"Doesn't matter anyway," Gabe said to the sergeant. "We're still being hunted, remember?"

To prove his point he remained at the edge of the jungle, scanning the horizon for any sign of the UIR frigates. Or better yet, a COG fleet roaring to their rescue. But the line between sea and sky was unbroken, save for another island off to the east.

"I will rest now," Cipi said, clearly uncomfortable now that they'd reached their destination. He gestured toward a tree back the way they'd come, with a rock beneath it. "If you need anything else, find me there. It's best if you do not return to the village."

"Thanks for your help," Gabe said to him, though he doubted the sincerity of the man's words. This was less about helping and more about keeping an eye on the island's unwanted guests.

The man nodded and wandered off, sidestepping past the line of Gears and sailors trailing behind Blair. He kept his head down as he passed them, and seemed in no particular hurry.

"Well," Blair said, "now what?"

Gabe glanced at her. Then the rest of the group.

"Gather 'round," he said. When they did, he took a knee. "At ease," he said. Some joined him, others sat or even lay down. A few stood, or leaned against trees. "We wait here as long as we can," Gabe said. "We've got no long-range comms, so no way to signal base. If we start a fire or something to get their attention, we'll have the UIR on us well before any COG ships can get here. So we wait. We have water. We'll find some food if we can, but if not… a day or two without eating isn't the end of the world."

A whole lot of glum faces stared back at him. He'd expected as much, but took it as his own failing. His job was to keep his troops in line, and to keep them inspired. No easy task in the sideshow of a long-running war. Vectes had become lax, the island too peaceful to instill a sense of grit and determination. Allowing things like "NO80" to go unchecked only allowed them to fester. A cancer, Phillips would call it. The odds that he could suddenly wring out some latent sense of patriotism seemed slim.

Without that, there was only fear.

"Squad leaders," he said, "organize your Gears into watches. No ship goes by this shore that we don't spot, understand? Pair up with members of the patrol boat crews, they're better at identifying ships from a distance." He took a long sweeping look at everyone. "The rest of you stay in the trees, just in case. But don't stray too far from the beach. And whatever you do, no going back to the village. Understood?"

"What about shelter?" someone asked. "If we're going to be here overnight."

Gabe nodded. "I'm just getting to that. If you're not on perimeter watch, make yourself useful. We won't be building any fires, so find some vines and start lashing them together. Hammocks will keep us off the ground and away from these damned ants." To hammer the point home he slapped one that was crawling up his forearm. The little monster was a smear of red juice and kicking legs when he pulled his hand away.

"Blair?" he said.

She stepped forward from the group.

"I need to know our supplies on hand. Beans, bullets, bandages, you

know the drill. We'll need to stretch what's left."

"You got it." She turned back to her squad.

"Let's have a proper response, Sergeant," Gabe said to her back.

She turned back to him, a flare of disobedience behind her eyes. It passed quickly, though.

"Yes, Lieutenant Colonel. I'll handle it."

"Good. Dismissed."

She snapped a salute and went back to her squad.

Gabe knew his second-in-command well enough to have confidence that she'd get over the exchange quickly, and recognize it for what it was: a reminder that discipline was needed to get them out of this mess. Still, he'd talk to her later, make sure the point was clear.

Glancing around, he spotted Wyatt. His brother was helping pull some vines to use for a shelter. The work happened to be within easy sight of where Ciprian was seated. The native had his eyes closed, and seemed to be asleep.

Satisfied, Gabe left the group to their tasks and walked a short distance away. Sitting at the base of a palm tree that seemed relatively free of fire-ants, he took out a notepad and began to make a list of his own.

Chief Mendez MIA
Sergeant Akino KIA
Private Howe KIA
Corporal Davis KIA

He stopped there, thinking about the sniper. Her modified Longshot. Her quiet competence. She'd stayed in that perch knowing full well the enemy guns were turning toward her, all because she had a shot and taking it might sway the battle. An act of bravery and commitment that she would never know the result of.

"I'll make it matter," he said to the sand, and sighed. The burden of a Gear's death while following his orders was exactly the reason the COG had posted him here. A place to heal, and to forget. The irony that trouble had followed him was not lost on Gabe Diaz. The question was whether or not such a turn of events was a coincidence, or if he had been placed here for some other reason.

Such thoughts were banished when a shadow fell across his pad of paper.

11: NEW INFORMATION

The shadow belonged to Gian.

"I'm interrupting," she said immediately, seeing Gabe's reaction to her arrival.

Gabe put the notepad away and stood. "It's alright. How's the arm?"

She glanced down at the bandaging and burn patches, and then the singed portion of her uniform around it. "I'll live," she said.

"Something on your mind?"

"Yeah," she replied, matter-of-fact as ever. "I was thinking about what you said earlier. That we had no way to signal Vectes?"

"From the look on your face, I'm guessing you've got an idea."

"It was actually your idea, sir," she said. "Sort of, anyway."

Gabe raised an eyebrow.

Speaking quickly, the engineer outlined her thought. Gabe listened carefully. The gist was as simple as it was brilliant, and inspired by the trick they'd pulled in the Cathedral Cave on Knifespire. Much like using the antenna there to their advantage, Gian suggested taking apart several suits of Gear armor, and bridging their comms units together to boost the power.

In response to her proposal, Gabe reached for the buckle on his chest armor.

"Hold on," Gian said. "To be clear, this is a massive hack. Have to take your armor apart. Pull some bits out, run some wires. Without the proper tools and a workshop, this might break your comms entirely, or leave them only semi-functional."

Gabe almost suggested she use someone else's, but then he realized what he'd be saying. That his life was more important than a lower-ranking Gear. It wasn't, but even if it was, that would not be the best topic to bring up when morale was low.

Gian was way ahead of him. "Only a transmission from your rank will register with the listening post at Vectes. They don't monitor enlisted frequencies."

"Do it, then," he said, and started to unbuckle the heavy chest armor.

"I'll need another comm to link with yours," Gian noted. "

Use mine."

It was Wyatt, who'd strolled over from the work crew while Gabe and Gian had been talking.

"What?" Gabe asked.

"I caught the gist of her plan. Use my armor. I'm pretty good at not getting shot, and who knows, with any luck we'll be back in Vectes without any more action to worry about."

Gabe frowned.

"Besides," his brother added, "a signal from my suit goes out on the spec-ops frequency. Believe me, we'll get a response."

Before Gabe could argue, Wyatt had his armor halfway off. He dumped it at Gian's feet, then knelt and started helping her to remove the maintenance panels that protected the radio. Unable to think of a valid argument against this, Gabe left his armor with them and went to see how his Gears were doing with the shelters.

The sun was halfway between its zenith and the horizon when Wyatt and Gian came to find him. His brother looked thin and wiry without his armor on. Gabe barely recognized him.

"Well?"

It was Wyatt who answered. "Got a response from Hoffman himself."

"How long until they send rescue?"

Wyatt scratched behind his ear. Gian was staring at her feet.

"This is not filling me with hope," Gabe muttered.

"About that… uh… Hoffman has sort of a different idea."

"Meaning what, exactly?"

"He said," Wyatt replied, "he wants to talk to you."

* * *

It was, in fact, both Hoffman and Phillips on the comm.

Gabe stood beside a palm tree and watched the waves come in as they explained what was going on.

But Gabe couldn't get his mind off the only word Hoffman had uttered that really mattered.

Imulsion.

The rare, highly coveted fluid that fueled this war in both senses of the word.

"Imulsion, sir? Are you sure?"

"Absolutely sure, Diaz," the man said. *"A Recon flight detected a vapor*

cloud rolling out of that cave on Knifespire shortly after your team left. Whatever you did there, it seems to have uncovered an Imulsion source no one knew about."

"Unbelievable," Gabe muttered.

"Believe it, son," Hoffman said. *"What's more, Recon also reports that the enemy are already moving more ships to the area. Clearly they know about it, too, and will do anything to get to it before we do."*

Gabe said nothing. What could he say?

"We've been on the line with Deputy Chairman Prescott already," Phillips added, sounding a bit self-important. *"This comes straight from him, Diaz. We need that island. Tell us you still have the resources to secure it."*

Retake the island.

Knifespire.

Gabe shook his head. "It's… it's impossible. We're practically out of ammo. Half my people are carrying secondhand Gorasni weapons. Several wounded with us. There's no way—"

For a moment, no one spoke. Finally, Hoffman broke the quiet.

"Okay, okay. Just hang tight. We're putting a fleet together."

"Everything we've got that can float," Phillips added. "All our remaining patrol boats, and three Corvas. The choppers are dressed for sub-hunting duties but it's what we have available."

"As you know, the battlegroup is currently assisting in the blockade of Reinvar," Hoffman said. *"But I can assure you a large portion will be diverted here, given this find. It's that important. In fact, one of the fast-attack boats, the CNV* Defiant, *is already on the way at maximum speed."*

Gabe rubbed his chin, trying to think. "This fleet from Vectes—" he started.

"They'll pick you up on the way to Knifespire. Twenty hours from now, roughly."

"My question was: why not have them go straight there?"

"Like it or not, you're our expert on the place now, Diaz. You have the latest intel and know the current lay of the land. We're counting on you to lead this effort and keep the enemy from securing the island. If we can keep them from digging in, we just might have a chance when the larger fleet arrives."

"They'll have a twenty-hour head start, sir. You and I both know that's too long. It'll be a massacre."

"We have to try," the response came. Simple, powerful, and terrible. *"You know that as well as we do."*

Gabe could hear the dejection in his voice, though. Hoffman wasn't happy about this, either. The fact was the UIR were in a better position, and would take this precious new Imulsion source easily. There was, it seemed, no way to prevent it. The COG had already lost.

But Gabe couldn't help himself. He did see a way. Maybe. "I'll report

back in an hour," he said. "There's something I need to do."

He signed off before they could argue.

Walking back to his Gears, Gabe envisioned the plan as he often did: like a tree, each branch a possible outcome that demanded a solution, all serving the trunk which began with the mission goal and ended with victory.

This tree had a lot of branches, and few he could see solutions for. Not when he started walking, at least. Yet by the time he reached his people, the plan was more or less fully formed.

And it started with a lie.

He looked to his Gears, and the Navy sailors, who had seen him approach and begun to gather around. Sensing news, expecting rescue. Not a fresh order to battle.

"I'm afraid I have to ask even more of you," he said to them once they'd all gathered. Gabe Diaz looked his soldiers in their hard eyes. He owed them that much, and more.

Because that was the other thing about handing down orders. At some point you reach the last link in the chain. And from there only two things remained: action, and consequences.

He raised his voice.

"It seems a source of Imulsion has been spotted on Knifespire," he said.

This sent a ripple through those gathered. Everyone, no matter their rank, understood the importance of such a thing.

"Every last ship Vectes has and more are on the way, but even that won't be enough. It's not rescue we're waiting for," Gabe said. "It's our ride. We're going back. In twenty hours a fleet will pick us up and take us to that island once again. This time, we're going to stay."

12: HOSTAGE SITUATION

Before Gabe's rallying speech had even ended, the sleeping Ciprian had woken, stretched, and wandered off back toward his village.

Exactly as Gabe had predicted.

"Blair, you're with me," he said. "The rest of you, be ready to leave at a moment's notice."

"You said twenty hours," a Gear complained.

Gabe held up a hand. "You have your orders. Blair, let's move."

He didn't wait for a response. Gabe slipped back into the jungle, following the path Ciprian had taken. The scrawny man must have jogged, because he was already out of sight, and that was okay. Gabe kept his pace casual, not wanting to arrive too soon.

"Going to tell me what this is all about?" Blair asked as they moved beneath the lush canopy. Then she added, "Sir?"

Gabe swatted a branch aside, then ducked under another.

"Call it a hunch, if you like."

"Is there going to be trouble?"

Gabe considered that.

"Maybe. Keep your sidearm at the ready, but holstered. Understood?"

She nodded. Blair knew when to ask questions and when to keep quiet. The rest of their walk passed in silence.

After a few minutes they reached a huge banyan tree. Gabe could see the village just beyond it. And people, too. A lot of them. He rounded the massive tree and slowed to a stop.

It seemed as if the entire village had gathered, but it wasn't him they were waiting for. No, their attention was entirely on the lone hut that faced west, up on the low hill.

Ciprian's house.

Gabe stepped into the clearing, with Blair just behind him on his right. A branch snapped under his foot.

The villagers turned and stared at him, instinctively parting to let him and his companion into their midst. At the front of the gathering was not Ciprian, but the matriarch. While everyone else had turned to look at Gabe, she had not. Her gaze was fixed firmly on the western-facing hut.

The woman started to speak. Gabe knew a few words of the local tongue, but her rapid-fire barrage of guttural noises came way too fast for him to make anything out. Except for two words.

Gear, and *hostage*.

Gabe realized suddenly that the fishermen gathered around were all armed, insofar as they could be. A few carried old pistols or small caliber hunting rifles. Most had machetes or axes. Their expressions were as varied as the weapons they carried. Anger, determination, fear, or simple confusion.

"What the hell's going on?" Blair asked, whispering out the side of her mouth.

"Relax, and let's keep our hands where they can see them, hmm?"

"If you say so," she replied.

Gabe demonstrated by holding his own hands out, palms down. When the matron finally turned and looked at him, he pointed toward the hut on the hillside.

"A Gear?" he asked.

She nodded, once. Gruff. Disgusted.

"And… Cipi?" he asked. The woman nodded again. It occurred to him then that he didn't know which of the men was the hostage, and which the captor. That didn't seem to matter too much at the moment. He lifted the Lancer off his shoulder and held it out to Blair.

"Is that wise?" she asked.

"Ask me again in ten minutes." Then he handed her his Snub pistol, too.

Blair took the weapons, stowing them as best she could. Still holding his hands out, Gabe walked slowly toward the trail, watching the matron instead of the house. Once he'd made it a few steps away from the group, her eyes narrowed, as if to say, "That's far enough." Gabe stopped there.

"Wyatt?" he called out.

No reply. The house was silent. The whole island seemed to have gone silent, in fact.

Gabe moved a little farther up the path, now halfway to the hut.

"Wyatt?" he called out again, louder.

"That you, Gabe?" his brother replied.

"Yeah."

"Come on up," Wyatt said. "You were right, brother."

Glancing back, Gabe saw concern in most of the villagers' eyes. Some were afraid. Several more looked angry. But it was the glare of the matriarch that gave him pause. Her look told him that whatever was going on here, it

better be over soon, or there would be trouble.

"Are you coming?" Wyatt called from the hut.

"Working on it," Gabe replied.

"You need to see this."

"Blair," Gabe said, "give their leader my pistol. Slowly."

Though it was clear from her pinched expression that Blair wasn't thrilled with this idea, she nevertheless drew the weapon—carefully—and held it out to the matriarch, grip first, as if it were a gift being offered to a queen.

The woman eyed it with contempt, however. Instead of taking it, she glanced at one of the men near her and jerked her chin toward the offered pistol, muttering a few quick words in her language.

The man took the weapon. To Gabe's surprise, he checked the clip and the safety. Former military, maybe? It didn't matter. He was the one the matriarch trusted with such a thing, and Gabe thought that was a good sign.

The thought proved correct a second later, when the old woman motioned for the man to join Gabe on the trail.

"Together," the man said as he approached, nodding toward Ciprian's hut. "Go together."

"Yes," Gabe said, relieved. This was what he'd wanted. Someone from the village, other than Ciprian, to witness what was in that hut.

They moved the rest of the way up the trail in silence. Gabe kept his hands out at his sides, holding them flat and visible. His escort remained a few steps behind, saying nothing as they approached the door to the small building. The thin wooden door was slightly ajar. Gabe pulled it open.

The home was a single room, a little more than ten feet on a side. On the south wall was the door, flanked by some simple cooking gear. The north wall was pressed against the hilltop. On the east and west walls there were large windows that afforded almost unbroken views in those directions. The open sea to the west, and a large portion of the Lesser Islands to the east.

There was a bed in one corner, and a cage where Cipi's monkey now sat, looking bored. It curled its lips at Gabe, but made no sound. A cabinet was tucked into the corner beside the bed.

Gabe's attention, though, was immediately drawn to the desk under the western-facing window. It was narrow, the surface well worn. Resting atop it were a pair of binoculars, a candle in a brass holder, notepads, and an old tin mug full of pens. In front of the desk sat a chair with wheels, discarded from an office somewhere. It had been used so much there were visible tracks across the wooden floor, stretching between the west and east windows.

Ignoring Wyatt and Cipi, Gabe crossed to the desk and flipped open the notepad on top of the pile. Within he saw a series of log entries. Times, dates, and—most telling—the registration identifiers of the various COG patrol boats stationed at Vectes. *"CNV 146, North-northwest at appox 12*

knots." Dozens of entries, on just this one page, dating back several weeks. The other pads no doubt contained more of the same.

"It's just as I thought," Gabe said to himself, looking out the big window at the horizon, knowing for certain that this was the window where he'd seen a candle burning, just before that first fateful landing on Knifespire.

Standing there, it was easy to imagine Ciprian staring out with his binoculars, observing every ship that passed, then wheeling to the other window to watch them complete their patrol routes.

"It's worse than you thought, actually," Wyatt said.

Gabe turned.

Wyatt stood near the cabinet by the bed, his MX8 pistol pointed at Ciprian's left temple. The terrified man was on his knees, staring at the floor, blubbering and shaking. A couple of feet away, a floorboard had been lifted and set aside, revealing a hidden space.

A rectangular object was nestled within. Gabe recognized it immediately. This, too, he'd expected.

It was a UIR radio. Military grade.

"Son of a bitch went straight to it," Wyatt noted. "Just like you told me he would. Reported everything he overheard on the beach. I assume it was everything."

Gabe stared at the object, nodding slowly.

"There's more," Wyatt said, which didn't surprise Gabe, either.

His brother tossed something to him. Gabe caught it, turning it over in his hands. Behind him, the villager who'd followed him up the path came closer, peering over Gabe's shoulder.

In his hands were a pair of night-vision goggles. UIR issue, not COG.

Gabe nodded once more as a hollow feeling began to grow in his gut. What was it Cipi had said? A green-eyed demon, who'd killed a little boy? The kind of goggles the Gorasni sometimes carried had a greenish tint. Cipi probably wore these when he ventured out to meet with them, receiving his pay or other supplies. Cypher pads.

"And this, too," Wyatt added.

He kicked something with his boot. A bundle of fabric, long and flat. Gabe hadn't spotted it before, but now it slid a few inches from Wyatt's foot and into the light.

There was dried blood on the burlap cloth.

Nudging it with the toe of his boot, Wyatt unrolled the bundle to reveal a machete with more of the dried blood on it.

The reaction from Gabe's escort was immediate. The man turned back to the door, stepping outside. He whistled loudly to the villagers gathered in the clearing below, then shouted several urgent words that Gabe did not understand. Immediately there came a commotion from down there. Everyone talking at once. Someone cried out in sudden, terrible grief.

Gabe let out a breath. Cipi, kneeling on the floor, had gone still too, save

for the occasional sniveling. Wyatt pressed his gun harder into the poor man's scalp.

"He's a spy, Gabe, but he's also a murderer. I'd bet my life on it."

"Just relax, Wyatt."

Someone was running up the path. Blair, as it turned out, looking ready to tackle someone. She stopped cold at the scene inside the hut, but kept her mouth closed.

Wyatt ignored her. He was still working himself up, the rage growing on his face with each word he spoke. "The kid who died probably saw something he shouldn't have. So this asshole killed him."

Gabe stepped forward, his hands out once again. He needed to get Wyatt under control, and quickly.

"He came in and transmitted his report?" Gabe asked. "This is important, Wyatt. What exactly did he say?"

Focused on the enemy spy, Wyatt rattled off a reasonably complete version of Gabe's speech. All the important details were there: the makeup of the fleet coming from Vectes, when they would arrive, and the fact that the base was being left virtually undefended.

"Fucking hell," Blair muttered. "Why didn't you stop him? That's our entire plan. And you stood by and listened?"

"I told him to," Gabe said, before Wyatt could answer.

Blair's mouth hung open. "Why, sir?"

"Yeah, why?" his brother echoed. "I still don't get it. Why'd you tell me to wait? To let him do it? They know we're coming now."

Gabe looked at them both. He took no satisfaction in his answer. "It's Imulsion, Wyatt. Of course the COG will come. If Cipi had said otherwise they would have known we'd caught him. Forced a false report out of him. This way, they'll believe it."

His brother squinted at him, baffled. "'Course they'll believe it, because it's what we're going to do. You've gone mad, brother. You just told the enemy our plan."

"Listen to me. They think they have twenty hours," Gabe explained. "We're going to be there in five."

A glimmer in Wyatt's eye emerged, but the gun remained planted against Ciprian's head.

"But," Gabe added, speaking with exaggerated calm, "only if you relax and let me handle this."

"Relax?" Wyatt demanded. "What the hell, brother? We should execute him. Right now. It's our right. Our duty. We lost a lot of Gears and sailors because of this piece of shit."

"Going to have to trust me on this one," Gabe said to him. Then he stepped aside, just as the footsteps on the path reached the hut. Men and women from the village suddenly crowded the door, weapons raised. They seemed unsure who should be the focus of their concern. Seconds passed

before the old woman pushed between them and entered.

She cast her gaze around the room. Cipi, the hidden parcel with the bloodied machete inside, the notebooks full of his careful observations. The UIR radio. The candle. She was quick to draw the right conclusions. A wise woman, as Gabe knew she would be.

"So it was you, Ciprian," she said. The man who'd escorted Gabe translated in a low, somber tone. "You. A green-eyed demon was seen that night. I think of all those times you brought up the child, poor Lexi, and you wondered if perhaps what had really been seen were soldiers. That they had killed him. *Gears*."

"Wasn't us," Blair said, and held up her own set of goggles. Switched on, the glow they cast was a dull red, barely visible even in the gloom of the tiny hut. "Of course, he wouldn't have known that little detail, would he?"

"He planned to pin it on us," Wyatt added. "Turn his village against the COG."

The old woman eyed the device, but this last bit of evidence was unnecessary. She turned her considerable glare on the cowering man once again. "It… was… *you*. I name you murderer!" She spat on the floor between herself and Ciprian.

Cipi bowed his head, defeated. Lost. He made no denial.

Gabe finally stepped between her and the dejected man on the floor.

"He killed one of yours," Gabe said. "But he's also responsible for the deaths of many of my people. Friends. Good men and women. And he disgraced your customs, taking a side and aiding the Gorasni. Making your island a target."

Wyatt made a noise at the back of his throat, but Gabe cut it off with a sharp glance.

"Justice," the woman said, "is ours to exact."

Again Wyatt started to complain, but, as he had so often in his life, he deferred to Gabe's example. The matriarch went on.

"Still, you have done us a great service, uncovering his crimes. You still must leave here, but we will give you what aid we can. Food, medicine."

Gabe waited for the translation, then nodded and asked what he'd intended to all along. "I'm afraid we need a bit more than that."

She eyed him. "Go on."

"Two things. First, we need some clothing. The sort of thing your fishermen wear when out at sea." This gave her pause, and yielded a puzzled glare that became suspicious, but she nodded all the same.

"Done. And the other?"

Gabe gestured toward their village.

"We need boats."

13: BLOOD IN THE WATER

The village's gratitude translated into a gift of ten small fishing boats that looked to be only days away from a short trip to the ocean floor. Yet their decrepit state was also, Gabe thought, perfect for what he needed.

And besides, it was more than he'd dared hope for. Exposing Ciprian as a spy who was putting this village at risk and flaunting their tradition of neutrality was one thing, but also bringing to light the murder he'd committed? That had sealed the deal in a way Gabe hadn't quite anticipated.

Yes, he thought, he could do a lot with ten boats, no matter their seaworthiness.

He and his Gears watched as the vessels were guided into the cove one by one, a process that took until late afternoon. As the villagers disembarked and walked away, it was with an air of mixed emotions that Gabe could appreciate. They were grateful, but perhaps just as importantly, they wanted the COG off their island, immediately.

"That modified comm still working?" Gabe asked Gian.

She said it was.

"Good. Put Wyatt and my armor back together if you can, but first I'll need to talk to base again in a minute. Can you raise them and have someone on standby?"

She nodded.

Gabe thanked her, then climbed up onto the deck of the nearest fishing boat.

For the second time that day, he gathered his troops around. They were on the beach now, not bothering to hide. Gabe noted that, as per his orders, each and every one of them was fully suited up and ready to go.

"The plan I told you about earlier was a lie," he said, voice raised. "A lie

not meant for you but for an Indie spy, who reported it exactly as I'd hoped."

The Gears and sailors below him exchanged glances.

Gabe held up a hand. "Don't get your hopes up. It was a lie, but not *entirely* a lie. There *is* Imulsion on Knifespire, and we *are* going back. Just much, much sooner than the enemy expects. We'll catch them unaware or, even better, asleep. It's our only chance to win that island."

Gabe slapped the railing before him. "Blair will split you up into squads as best she can, and divide our remaining ammo evenly. We sail in twenty minutes."

The faces before him hardened, thanks to the immediacy of his words. This was no vague battle that might happen tomorrow. This was real. This was now.

They got to work.

Satisfied, Gabe went to Gian and her improvised comm. Hoffman and Phillips were waiting for him.

"Keep the fleet there," Gabe said. He explained before Hoffman could accuse him of cowardice for trying to call off the attack. "We're going to Knifespire now, in fishing boats. No time to explain, but it means we'll have boots on the ground in a few hours instead of nearly a day. What's more, the enemy is likely to reroute a large portion of its fleet to Vectes, which is why you might want to keep some firepower down there."

"What?!" Phillips exploded. *"What the hell did you do, Diaz?"*

"The only thing that makes sense," Gabe snapped. "Besides, it's done, so listen up, because I have a plan and I'm going to need your help for it to work."

"You're not the one giving orders here," his Captain roared.

It was Hoffman who responded to her, though, speaking before Gabe could.

"I don't know, Phillips, it seems like he is."

* * *

The boats puttered toward Knifespire, their aging wooden hulls creaking with each crest of a wave and groaning with the slap against the cool waters that immediately followed.

There was no breeze to speak of, a fact Gabe was grateful for as the waves could have been much worse. But this lack of wind had a downside, too. A major one.

Knifespire did not come into view when it should have.

Instead, a cloud hung over the island. Dark and ominous at its highest altitudes, like a deep bruise painted shades of orange on its western side where the sun was now just below the horizon.

The lower part of this cloud, though, was *wrong*.

Gabe knew the reason immediately, because he'd once fought a battle at a UIR Imulsion refinery. The vapors stirred up by the luminous liquid carried an awful yellowish glow. In his previous experience, numerous fires and a stiff breeze had both served to mitigate the effect. But here, on a still night over a calm island, the vapors simply clung, shrouding the island and the surrounding waters in a dimly glowing fog.

"That's going to be a problem," Wyatt observed.

Gabe wasn't so sure. "If we can get in there," he said, "it levels the field. We're low on ammo, but they won't be able to see who's who in there." Mentally he put himself in that situation, imagining not just the intense close-quarters combat, but the disorientation and mistaken identities. "Pass the word along to everyone. Once we get inside that cloud, we stay close together. Move in groups."

"Got it," Blair said.

"Bayonets whenever possible," Gabe added. "Conserve ammo."

"Agreed, sir." She sniffed at the air, as if trying to smell the distant cloud. "I don't know about you, but I'm not looking forward to breathing that."

"Me neither," Wyatt added. "Heard stories…"

Gabe had, too. Miners afflicted with terrible racking coughs that left them spitting blood. "We'll worry about that tomorrow," he said, "right now we have a job to do. And besides, the enemy will have it as bad as we do."

For a long time no one spoke. They all stared at the island as it grew closer, obscured under its awful shroud. Gabe was starting to get a sense of the shape of it. The low southern tip, the long and slightly sloped Gatka Ridge, and the spire on the north end. All were virtually hidden, only occasionally offering glimpses of their topography as the cloud grew and shifted.

"There," Wyatt said, pointing.

Gabe had just spotted them, too. Enemy boats.

"They've moved right up close to the shore," Gian noted. "Offloading troops, or equipment?"

"Maybe both," Gabe said. "Could be they just want to disguise their numbers." He'd hoped to find them all gone, powering hard for Vectes and its undefended walls. Wishful thinking, of course. They may well have taken that bait, but of course they would leave a force behind to hold the Imulsion source. It was too valuable to just leave unattended.

Gabe shifted his attention to the island itself. He thought he saw movement in the thick Imulsion fog, but it was hard to say for sure. Setting up an extraction rig, or putting defenses into place? It was impossible to tell. He looked back at the more immediate problem: the enemy fleet.

He could make out two frigates in the edges of the mist. And then…

"That's a fucking battleship," Wyatt said. "When the hell did they get a battleship here?"

"Does it matter when?" Gabe asked.

"I guess not."

Gabe signaled to the man at the helm, Graham. "Slow up. Half speed."

"Engines to half," he repeated, and the tone of the coughing old engine changed.

For a time no one spoke. *They're waiting for me*, Gabe realized. *Think, think.*

Before he could work through the implications, there was a crackle of static in his ear. Gian had reassembled his armor on the beach before leaving. Wyatt's too, though she'd warned that both were unlikely to work well, if at all. She'd done her best, but without tools the work was far from trivial.

And she'd been right. Ever since leaving he'd been assaulted by the occasional sharp hiss in his ear, followed once by a garbled voice.

This time the voice was intelligible.

"—approaching your position," the voice said, *"and awaiting instructions."*

"Repeat?" Gabe said. "This is Lieutenant Colonel Diaz, please repeat and identify yourself."

More static, more mangled words. Gabe heard the word "Corva," though, and sighed with relief.

"—inbound to Knifespire. Approx fifteen minutes. Repeat, one-five minutes. Requesting orders."

"Affirmative," Gabe said. "Stand by."

Gabe nodded toward Graham. "How long until we hit the beach?"

"About fifteen," Graham said.

"Perfect." He glanced at Wyatt. Wyatt glanced at him.

"Phillips said those Corvas are outfitted for sub-hunting," Gabe reminded him. "Will it be enough to take on that battleship?"

Wyatt shrugged. "No experience with a ship like that, brother. Sorry."

But Graham answered the question. "If they come in low, and get a clear shot, sure."

Wyatt grunted. "No clear shot in that goddamn haze."

He was right, of course. Gabe rubbed at his stubbled chin, thinking.

"I'm going to have to paint the target for them," he said, finally.

"How the hell are you going to do that?" Gian asked.

Gabe shrugged. "Drop my armor in the water by its hull and switch on the rescue beacon."

She thought about it, then nodded, grimly. They all looked grim. What Gabe was proposing would work, but was very likely a one-way mission.

"It should be me," Wyatt said. When Gabe glanced at him, his brother held his stare.

At a gesture, Gabe followed his brother toward the gunwale. They stood at the railing, both facing the island.

"It's the type of thing I've trained for, Gabe, and you know it." When

Gabe did not reply, he added, "Besides, you need to lead the charge onto the beach. It's going to be hell, too, don't worry."

"I'll ask for volunteers," Gabe muttered.

"I am the volunteer, brother."

Gabe forced himself to look at the man, now. A face he'd known since his earliest memories. Always up to something. Always trying to prove himself, or get back at those who'd wronged him.

"I can't ask you to do this," he said.

"True," Wyatt replied. "But you can order me to. Look, if anyone has a chance to do this and still get away, it's me, right? A Ghost? You call this a dangerous op, we call it a fucking Tuesday."

There was, Gabe realized, no arguing it. There was only the decision.

"Okay. Okay. Do it," he said. "But… come back, Wyatt. That's an order, too."

"Sure. But the mission comes first," Wyatt said.

"The mission comes first," Gabe agreed. He embraced his brother, and Wyatt returned the gesture fiercely. When they parted, Gabe looked at him grimly. "Wait here," he said.

He went to Blair, then, and she led him to the meager cache of supplies they had left. Cataloging it on the beach before leaving had been a chore, but now it proved key. Gabe grabbed what he'd come for, ignoring Blair's concerned look, and went back to Wyatt.

Gabe placed the shaped charge in Wyatt's hands.

"In case Plan A fails," Gabe said. "Use this. Plan B."

"Aw, brother, you know I don't like to think past Plan A."

"And you know that I do."

"Yeah, B, C, all the way down the whole damn alphabet." He grinned, despite his tone. "You haven't changed a bit, brother. All these years."

"It stops at B this time, I'm afraid. Last resort, okay? I mean that."

"Last resort," Wyatt repeated, tucking the device away.

"Graham," Gabe called out over the thudding engine. "Any sign they've spotted us yet?"

"Negative, sir," the man replied.

"Good." To Wyatt he said, "Take a boat, go around to approach from the east. Their attention will be on us, and with any luck they'll think you're Ciprian, making an escape. Find a rain shawl or something to cover your armor with."

Wyatt nodded. "You can count on me, brother."

"I know, Wyatt. But you know you have nothing to prove to me, right?"

"'Course," Wyatt said, grinning slyly. "But I can always build the legend a little more." With that he winked, and set off to the ladder as another fishing boat pulled aside for the transfer.

Gabe had no time to waste. He activated his comm again.

"Lead Corva, this is Diaz." He gave them the details of Wyatt's rescue

beacon. "Time your arrival for fifteen minutes from now. Make your run from the west, the sun might disguise your approach. Is that understood?"

"We'll do our best," the pilot replied.

"What's your name, pilot?" Gabe asked.

"Sorotki, sir."

"Well, Sorotki, I don't need your best. I need this done, and done precisely. We only get one shot."

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Diaz out."

He glanced at Graham, Kabir, and Gian, who together were doing their best to make the old fishing boat behave.

"Get us on that beach before they realize this is not some night fishing expedition."

"Sir," the three replied in unison.

Gabe, along with the rest of the Gears, hunkered down in back, trying to keep hidden from view.

Unable to help himself, though, Gabe lifted his head just enough to watch Wyatt's boat as its path diverged, taking him east, then north.

* * *

They were a minute out from the beach when it all went to hell.

"Sir!" Blair shouted, pointing.

But Gabe, still watching Wyatt's craft as it bobbed along toward the enemy fleet, had seen it already.

The UIR ships were on the move, getting out from under the shadow of the spire and into open sea. As they emerged from the cloud of haze, Gabe's heart sank. He'd miscalculated, and badly.

The battleship was a real bruiser, but it was the frigates that terrified him now. There weren't two, but ten, and at least four were decked out for anti-aircraft duty.

"No," Gabe hissed. "No, no, no."

It was too late to do anything about it. The shore loomed dead ahead. In the distance he could just make out Wyatt's little fishing boat as it bounded toward the enemy ships, who no doubt had a clear view of him now. There was only hope, at this point, Gabe realized. Hope they wouldn't look in that direction. Hope that Wyatt could get into their ranks far enough to place his beacon beside the right vessel.

And hope that the beach ahead was not yet defended.

As if the island of Knifespire itself could read his every thought, the trees began to sparkle.

"Down!" Gabe shouted.

A massive barrage of gunfire *thwipp*ed into the water and rattled against the hull. The window in front of Graham suddenly spiderwebbed

and the man jerked. Gabe saw blood start to seep through the back of his uniform, at his right shoulder blade, but the sailor kept both hands on the wheel and his focus on the task at hand.

Gabe glanced back, met Blair's gaze.

This was going to be ugly, but she was ready. They all were.

Behind her, far off now, he saw the fishing boat moving at speed toward the UIR frigates. At this distance it was impossible to see Wyatt, but Gabe could imagine what was going through his head. What he was doing was unbelievably dangerous, but it would be what turned the tide here, Gabe felt sure.

"Beach in ten seconds!" Graham shouted over the low rumble of gunfire coming from the island. "Get ready!"

It all happened so fast.

The boat took a hard right, and Graham killed the engines. All around them, the other fishing boats did the same.

"OVER!" Gabe shouted.

And then a storm of movement as his Gears vaulted the side and were knee-deep in the waves.

A Gear beside Gabe lurched and fell backward, a bullet hole just above his left eye, leaking blood and brain fluid into the dark water.

Farther off, someone started to scream. The sound was cut off with a horrible gargling as someone went down with a splash.

Gabe ignored it all. The beach was the only thing that mattered. Cover.

He waded forward, firing bursts from his Lancer toward the tree line. It didn't take a genius to realize the enemy was far more prepared than he'd expected. Defensive positions were set up all along Gatka Ridge, and though they were partially fogged in, their targets coming ashore were not. Not yet, anyway. Tracer fire lit up the beach and the shallows as gunners sprayed the incoming Gears with an overwhelming barrage.

It was then the fleet joined the onslaught.

The whistle of a shell signaled their entry into the battle. Followed by explosions all along the beach, and a thunder from out at sea where they now had a perfectly clear shot at the fleet of fishing boats.

Gabe knew his little trick using the natives' watercraft would not last once they made for shore, but he didn't expect it to be this quick.

He threw himself behind a driftwood log twenty feet up the beach, if only to hide from the machine-gun fire coming from the ridge. There was no defense against the shelling coming from out at sea.

"C'mon Wyatt," Gabe whispered. He tapped his comm. "Sorotki, report! Where the hell are you!?"

"Target's painted!" the Corva pilot replied. *"Initiating attack!"*

Gabe said a silent thanks to his brother, and the timing of the helicopter pilots. Another minute of this shelling and he wouldn't have any Gears left to hold up his end of the bargain.

He ducked low as another barrage of bullets tore into the driftwood barricade he'd hidden behind. Blair, a few feet away, took a quick glance over the edge of the log, then ducked back down.

"They've got gas masks," she said, disgusted. "It's practically cheating."

"We'll take them for ourselves as we go. Along with their weapons and ammo."

She glanced at him, nodding gruffly. Blair knew as well as he did that this battle would be unwinnable if the Gears had to rely on their own equipment and supplies.

"Ten seconds," Sorotki reported. *"Entering the cloud!"*

Gabe waited, gritting his teeth. Another shell tore into the beach. A big one, from that battleship. Hot sand blasted across Gabe's shoulders and back. Bits of flaming fabric, too. The remains of someone's uniform.

Another salvo targeted the fishing boats, reducing them to flaming planks of wood in a matter of seconds. There would be no retreat, now.

From somewhere to the north Gabe heard a new sound, like a pile of dry wood being consumed by an inferno.

"Anti-air!" Sorotki shouted, panic in his voice. *"There's too many!"*

"Abort!" another pilot said on the comm.

"Do not abort!" Gabe roared. "Hit that beacon or we're all dead!"

The crackling sound continued, a constant and ugly vibration.

"Corva Three is down," Sorotki reported, speaking through clenched teeth. *"Taking fire, taking fire!"*

"C'mon, c'mon," Gabe muttered, "keep your nerve, son." Then he tapped his comm again. "Wyatt, are you clear?"

Instead of a response from his brother, Gabe heard a sudden scream from the pilot of Corva Two, a sound abruptly cut off by a crash of static.

"Wyatt?" Gabe repeated. "Are you clear?"

His brother made no reply.

"Torpedo away," Sorotki announced. *"Taking heavy fire. I've lost fuel pressure on—"*

Static drowned his words.

Turning toward the ocean, Gabe was in time to see an explosion bloom from the hull of one of the frigates. It was a massive blast, lifting the ship several feet above its draft before the UIR ship tipped and cracked in half, spilling fire and bodies as it quickly sank.

It was not the battleship, though. The shot had missed.

Gabe turned to Blair, who was looking at him with an expression of grim determination. They had only one choice. She knew it as well as he did. But it would have to be him that said it.

"Advance!" Gabe shouted.

And then he was over the barrier, pounding across the stretch of sand between him and the palm trees. He threw his only grenade into a machine-gun nest off to his left, then angled himself toward another on his right. In

the flashes of Lancer fire and the flames burning all around, he could make out the blurry forms of Indie guerillas in gas masks, hunkered down and well covered.

"Grenades!" Blair roared.

Those who had them, used them. The rest laid down fire as they rushed the trees. Explosions lit up the cloud of Imulsion. Bodies were thrown into the air. Gears fell, screaming, or just diving for cover out of sheer instinct.

It was total chaos, once they reached the glowing vapor.

Despite it all, Gabe had to try once more. He slowed, then took a knee, activating his comm. "Wyatt?! Did you get clear?! Respond!"

Nothing. A bullet whizzed past his ear, but Gabe ignored it.

"Wyatt, goddammit! Talk to me!"

Gabe barely noticed when Blair knocked him to the ground, an instant before an enemy grenade exploded where he'd been kneeling.

"LC!" Blair shouted. It sounded like a whisper, but he knew somewhere deep down the word had been yelled at the top of her lungs straight into his ear. "Snap the fuck out of it! He's gone! We've got to get onto that ridge or we will be, too! Now MOVE!"

Then her hands were at the collar of his armor, and she heaved him to his feet. Her face was pure rage. Her eyes wide and wild. She shook him, hard.

"Make it fucking mean something, goddammit."

This she did not shout, but he heard the words, loud and clear. Gabe blinked, took a shaky breath, and nodded to her. He turned and grabbed a rocket launcher dropped by the slain Gear. It had only one round left.

"The ridge!" he shouted, realizing others had slowed when he did, waiting for him.

He fired, and his Gears followed the example. Rockets flew. Targets picked at random. Fireballs bloomed to life all along the gentle slope of Gatka Ridge, anywhere muzzle flashes revealed the positions of the enemy. The sun was at the enemy's back, just a fiery sliver on the horizon now, obscured by smoke and Imulsion. When the Gears had been on the beach, it had been as good a shooting gallery as any eager young Gorasni could ever hope for. But the moment Gabe and his troops entered the thick Imulsion haze, everything changed.

Because in that glowing, golden cloud they were on equal footing.

Good, Gabe thought, and he rushed toward the enemy.

14: NEVER-ENDING SUNSET

In the Imulsion cloud, visibility dropped to twenty feet or less.

Gabe, sure he'd been the first in and thus carrying no doubt that only the enemy would be in front of him, rushed the first human shape he saw. He had his Lancer's bayonet buried all the way to the poor bastard's gut before he even saw the man's surprised eyes behind the fogged-up cover of his gas mask.

Gabe yanked the blade free, tearing the mask off even as the Gorasni slumped over, gurgling as he hit the dirt. He wanted nothing more than to put that mask on, as his lungs already burned from the acrid air.

Before Gabe could pull the mask on, though, something swung at his head. He ducked and rolled, twisting as he came back to his feet and lunging with his Lancer. The guerilla before him shifted to avoid the jab, then slashed with his machete. *Must have run out of ammo*, Gabe thought, as he sidestepped the blade, aimed, and fired from the hip into the man's abdomen. The poor bastard's guts blew out of his lower back and sprayed across a fern.

He crumpled. Gabe moved on. He'd been in the cloud barely ten seconds and already he felt the Imulsion sting in his lungs and eyes. Worse, he'd lost the others. Blair was nowhere to be seen, or any other Gear for that matter.

Despite the harsh dose of reality she'd given him, Gabe couldn't help himself. He tried once more, coughing as he spoke. "Wyatt, report. What is your status?"

Silence answered him.

"Sorotki, do you read me?"

This time he did get a reply, though it was distant and punctuated by hisses of static. *"—leaking fuel. Need to turn around and try to make Vectes."*

Gabe grimaced. That was not what he'd hoped to hear. "Did you save a hunter?"

"One torp left, sir, but it doesn't matter. Firing linkage is toast. I can't help you."

Gabe took a breath, and let it out. "How many combat missions have you flown, Sorotki?"

A hesitation. *"One,"* he replied. *"This one."*

Gabe ran a hand down his face. He couldn't do it. How could he ask someone so young to do this? There was no choice, though.

"Well, Sorotki, you've got a chance here to make yourself into a legend. How's that sound?"

"To be honest," he replied, a nervous laugh under his words, *"I'd rather be back in Vectes with a glass of beer."*

"We all would, son." Gabe smiled. "But we've got a job to do."

"I'm not sure what I can do."

Gabe told Sorotki the plan.

Then he waited. And waited.

After a pause, from shock or simply an inability to transmit, the pilot finally replied.

"You're insane," he said.

"I know, Sorotki. But it's our only chance. Will you do it—"

A UIR soldier came howling out of the haze and tackled him. A solid takedown, driving him into the sandy muck and forcing the wind from his lungs. Gabe used the momentum, though, and kicked upward as they landed, vaulting her over him and sending her cartwheeling into the oblivion of the cloud. She vanished, lips curled back in a snarl as she went.

Rolling onto his stomach, Gabe pushed to stand up, brandishing the bayonet on his Lancer, ready for all comers—but no one came. He took a tentative step toward where the woman had just disappeared, and realized he had no idea which way that had been. In the process of being tackled, then rolling over and standing, he'd become disoriented.

"Sorotki?" Gabe tried. "Please confirm your orders."

Nothing.

"Wyatt?! Blair!?"

Still nothing. He gave up. Interference, he told himself. The alternative explanation was too terrible to contemplate.

"Blair!?" he tried again, shouting this time.

"Here!"

But the word seemed to come from everywhere. At least she was still alive.

He had to find her. Warn her in case Sorotki had the fuel and the guts to do what Gabe had asked. Gabe moved north, farther up Gatka Ridge. Half a mile distant the massive spire loomed, lit from the glow of Imulsion and fire from below like some demonic fang out of anyone's worst nightmare.

Gabe coughed as he jogged. The luminescent golden haze swirled, completely enveloping him. It reeked like a blend of sulfur and gasoline, and made his throat itch. He'd heard stories—horrible stories—of the effects Imulsion had on those who worked around it for long periods. But those people only got the occasional whiff of the stuff. This was like being in a damned steam bath. He had to do something about it. Casting about, Gabe spotted a fallen enemy nearby and took the gas mask from him. He pulled it on, and tightened the strap.

Fighting raged all around him. Grunts and screams, sporadic gunfire, and beneath it all the moaning agony of the wounded. Spot fires raged in the trees, casting flickering shadows in the choking haze.

He started forward, jogging, glad of the relief the mask provided. Already the burning sensation in his lungs had abated.

A screech behind him. Gabe tried to turn, but too late. The snarling Gorasni woman from before came flying out of the trees and tackled him again, this time by crashing into his upper back and throwing her arms around his neck. Her hands clawed at his neck and face, tearing the gas mask away. Gabe's feet, in soft sand, were thrown out from under him. He went down face first into the fine powdery stuff, his body driven in by her weight and the force of her assault.

Sand filled his mouth and nose. His eyes immediately began to sting again from the aerosolized Imulsion in the air all around him.

Something punched his side. Once, twice, and then a third time. She was stabbing him, he realized, but the tip of her blade kept finding armor. It was only a matter of time before the blade would find a gap, though, so he did the only thing he could think to do. His Snub pistol was still in its holster. Gabe yanked it free and twisted his arm around as if about to shoot himself in the head. But he angled his hand back just a bit farther than that.

The woman saw the gun, swung her machete up and around.

Gabe fired.

There came a strange snapping noise, and for a second neither of them moved. Gabe twisted around and saw her outstretched hand, the blade still in it. Only, half the blade was gone. She'd tried to block his shot with it, a move of pure instinct that might have worked if she'd been holding a block of carbon weave or pure steel. The blade had done nothing at all to stop the bullet. It had gone right through, shattered her gas mask next, then bored into her left eye socket.

She toppled sideways.

Gabe pushed himself up from the sand, coughing out wads of the gritty stuff. It clung to his teeth and coated his throat. He needed water, but had lost his canteen. The sand was, at least, preferable to the nauseating acrid haze of Imulsion.

He glanced around for his gas mask, found it, then threw it into the trees after seeing the cracked casing. The Gorasni soldier's was useless, too, after

he'd put a round through it.

Gabe supposed breathing some Imulsion was just about the least of his concerns right now, and gave up.

"Squad leaders, report," he said into the comm.

Fighting raged across the island. If any of them heard him, they were too busy to reply.

15: MEETING OF THE MINDS

Gabe continued north, his mind racing.

Sorotki had gone silent, never confirming Gabe's order. Wyatt was MIA, or worse.

From the sounds of battle raging across the island, there were a decent number of Gears still on their feet, but something about the tone of those skirmishes worried him. The intensity had dropped. Or maybe he'd just gotten too far from the action.

Someone came rushing around the tree in front of Gabe and swung their Lancer at him.

Lancer?

Gabe ducked under the weapon, dove to one side, and held up a hand.

"Friendly, friendly!"

Blair stared down at him. Her face was coated in dust and grime. Probably some blood, too, though he couldn't tell if it was hers or the enemy's. Certainly a lot of it dripped from the blade of her Lancer's bayonet. A murderous insanity gleamed in her large eyes.

"Where have you been?" she asked.

"Me? Speak for yourself," he said. "Tried to raise you, to raise anyone… but no one replied."

She reached out and helped him to his feet. Then she twisted him and studied the back of his armor.

"Your comm is off, idiot."

"That's *Lieutenant Colonel* Idiot, to you."

Blair punched his shoulder.

"Must have been when that Gorasni was trying to carve my kidneys out with her machete," he said. "No wonder everyone stopped replying."

Blair glanced around, suddenly alert. "Where's this Gorasni now?"

"Dead," he replied.

"Well, great," she said. "We can marvel at your prowess later. Test your comm."

"Can you hear me?" he said, activating the mic.

Blair shook her head. "Are you reading me?"

Gabe could. He nodded. "Transmitter must be shot."

"Guess that puts me in charge!"

"I suppose it does. Listen, we need to get everyone back. South side of the ridge. Now."

"Why?"

"No time, just do it." He didn't know if Sorotki would come through, but if there was even the slightest chance…

Blair was already off and running, back toward the center of Gatka Ridge. "LC located. His comm is down," she said into her own radio. "All squads rally at the south end of Gatka Ridge. I repeat, south end!"

Gabe was heartened to hear several affirmatives come back. Despite everything, his Gears weren't defeated. Not yet anyway. He followed Blair. Or tried to. She'd rushed headlong into the yellowish glowing haze, quickly becoming a shadow. With no other option, Gabe moved in the direction she'd gone, stowing his Lancer in favor of his MX8 pistol in one hand and the machete in the other.

He soon found himself weaving through a maze of boulders and smaller rocks that were scattered across the damp soil. Ferns had been uprooted by grenade blasts, and several trees were aflame. Weaving through the mess, he hoped against hope that he wouldn't see the outstretched hand of a Gear sticking out from one of those fires.

Thinking of the dead and fallen reminded him of Wyatt. He realized suddenly that he'd built a wall in his mind, ever since losing contact with his brother when the Corvas had targeted his beacon and unleashed a barrage of Hunter-class torpedoes on those ships. They'd missed their target, yes, but where had Wyatt been when they did? Swimming away? Back on his fishing boat amongst all those enemy ships?

This wasn't the time to think about it. Gabe gritted his teeth and quickly erected that mental wall again. Deep down, he knew the truth. Wyatt must be gone. He would have to accept that, but acceptance could come later. And grief, too. There was always time for grief. Too much, really.

Fighting still raged around him, but it seemed to be dwindling. Somewhere behind him the guns of the enemy frigates started firing again, but their targets were distant, as he heard no explosions or even the whine of their shells sailing overhead. Whatever they were shooting at, it wasn't on Gatka Ridge, or anywhere else on the island. Gabe had an idea what that might mean, but didn't want to get his hopes up.

Movement on his right, from the direction of the spire.

"Blair?"

No, he realized. Not Blair.

A group of UIR foot soldiers, equipped with Gnashers and wearing gas masks. They must have realized their enemies were moving toward the southern end of the ridge, and from the way they were running it was clear they thought the rout was on. These soldiers were bloodthirsty, almost gleeful, as they stormed toward their fleeing foe.

Then they saw Gabe. A lieutenant, and all alone.

He couldn't see their faces due to the masks, but Gabe knew that each of them was grinning from ear to ear at their luck.

C'mon Sorotki, Gabe thought, *if you're going to come through for me, do it now, before they all come out of their barricades and hunt us down.*

He knew instantly that he needed to get in close, or those shotguns would tear him to shreds. So Gabe rushed straight toward the enemy at a full sprint. Rammed his shoulder into the lead guerilla, powering through the man and slicing the one behind him across the jaw with the blade of his machete, cutting the gas mask in two in the process. The man screamed and twisted as he fell, pulling Gabe's machete away. He landed atop his comrade whom Gabe had driven to the dirt with his shoulder.

Stopping meant death, so Gabe forgot about the blade and kept running. The next soldier was bringing his gun up, firing before he really knew what was happening. The shot slapped into the dirt between them, and before the man could adjust his aim and get another off, Gabe had lifted his MX8 and shot him in the throat.

The fourth was ready, though. He dropped to the ground as Gabe fired, sliding into Gabe's ankle and sending him sprawling. *Shit, he's fast!* Gabe tumbled in the mud. The dirt tasted of ash and Imulsion, just about the worst combination he could imagine.

Coming to his feet unsteadily, Gabe turned in time to see this last enemy approach.

"Well, well," the man said in a thickly accented voice, pulling down his gas mask so that it rested around his neck.

"You again," Gabe replied. It was the bald officer he'd seen twice before. "Thought maybe my sniper got you on that frigate."

"And I thought you'd been at the helm of the fishing boat." He spat, then grinned. It was a smile Gabe did not return. Instead, he swung his MX8 Snub up and fired. But as he squeezed the trigger his opponent knocked the gun from his hand with a sharp *crack* across his wrist with the heavy barrel casing of a Booshka grenade launcher, wielded like a club. Gabe's pistol still fired, but the shot went wide and the weapon clattered off a nearby boulder. It landed in the mud, ten feet away.

He was weaponless now, and the other man knew it.

"Nice trick, by the way," the enemy said as he circled Gabe, savoring the moment. "Using those fishing boats. Would have worked, too, except for one mistake."

"What mistake was that?"

"Expecting me to believe that the COG would sit on their hands for twenty hours when there was an Imulsion source to be won." He grinned, baring his teeth. With a sudden jab, too quick for Gabe to dodge, he lashed out with the Booshka, hitting Gabe just below the sternum and driving him to a knee. The blow left him gasping, torturing his already stinging lungs.

From behind Gabe came the sound of anti-aircraft guns roaring at the sky.

The enemy went on, gloating now. "The COG is too desperate for Imulsion to wait so long. So I ignored Ciprian's message. And here you are, a feeble force that's already failed. The Imulsion is ours, Gear. The war will be ours, too—"

A sudden roar filled the air. The howling engine of Sorotki's Corva, diving out of the sky from the south, moving at full speed, flak exploding all around it. And behind it, just a few hundred feet above, the tiny square of a parachute.

The kid had followed orders after all.

The UIR officer turned to see what was going on. Gabe would have pressed this advantage, but the best he could manage was to find his footing again. He stood swaying, watching the scene before him unfold as the chopper roared down.

The Corva slammed into a spot just above the middle of the four-hundred-foot-tall spire, a place where the rock narrowed and was riddled with several ancient fractures. A place that Davis had told Gabe about when she'd climbed to her sniper roost what seemed like a lifetime ago.

Sorotki's aim could not have been better.

The impact detonated the one remaining Hunter-class torpedo aboard, as well as what little fuel the aircraft still carried. The result was a massive fireball. The rock beneath Gabe shook as the whole island reverberated from the blast.

But this explosion was nothing compared to what followed. Gabe's gambit had worked.

He watched in fascination and horror as the massive rock feature cracked in half, and the top two hundred feet began to tilt like a tree being felled for lumber. Only instead of a log of wood, this was a few thousand tons of rock.

The massive chunk of stone split in half as it fell, then seemed to shatter into a hundred boulders each the size of a large home, but that did nothing to change the result. Knifespire smashed into the ground, not just in front of the Cathedral, but in a line stretching due south for almost seventy yards. It shook the earth as if the planet were tearing itself apart, pulverizing anything beneath it. The UIR soldiers, their guns and equipment, but most of all the cave that held the Imulsion source.

"No…" Gabe's opponent whispered. He was rooted in place, watching

helplessly as his prize was buried.

It was then that the shrapnel began to rain down. Gabe and his opponent both dove for cover as chunks of smoldering rock the size of bricks began to hammer into the ridge all around them. Some larger chunks hit the ground and exploded, or smashed into trees, snapping them like twigs.

A rush of air roared out from under the falling rock and, as Gabe had also hoped, the cloud of Imulsion gas clinging to the ground was thrust off Gatka Ridge and out over the sea, where it quickly started to dissipate.

Blair was saying something in Gabe's ear, but he couldn't afford to be distracted now. The gist was clear enough: Gatka Ridge was clear, and much of the enemy force had been pulverized by the fallen mountain. She was ordering the Gears to advance.

Gabe smiled. Couldn't help it.

"And that's *your* mistake, Gorasni," he said. "Your leaders, and mine, might be happy to fight over Imulsion, but me? Personally, I can't stand the stuff."

The enemy whirled on Gabe, a sneer of rage distorting his face. The battle around them seemed to melt away.

"Do you realize what you've done?!" he shouted, spit flying from his lips out of absolute anger.

"Yep," Gabe said. "It'll take years to clear that pile of rock. Not something either side could pull off in wartime, I think. So Knifespire's off the playing field again, just like the rest of these islands."

A long, long moment passed as the enemy officer stared at Gabriel Diaz, and in that time his shock and anger crystallized into something worse. Resolve.

Without taking his eyes off Gabe, he activated his own comm. "The ridge is clear," he said. "Scorch it. Every… last… inch." Then he switched the device off, narrowing his gaze.

From the east, out at sea, the battleship opened fire once more. Her massive deck guns lit up the night and, seconds later, Gatka Ridge began to boil and shudder under a thunderous barrage.

The man renewed his hold on the Booshka. One hand on the grip, the other curled around the midsection where a cartridge of grenades should have been. He held the bulky weapon expertly, as if it weighed nothing more than a stick.

A sudden blur of movement as he stepped in and jabbed.

Gabe dodged, made to counterattack with a backhanded punch. The enemy anticipated this and lurched away, but Gabe's blow had been a feint. Instead he went for the man's leg, pulling a small knife from its holster on the Gorasni's calf.

They squared off again. The fact that Gabe was now armed only served to amplify the gleam in his opponent's eyes. The bastard was enjoying this.

He smiled as he flexed his fingers on the grenade launcher.

Gabe went in low, slashing at the legs. The blade found only air as his enemy leapt backward. He brought his own weapon down, but dodging Gabe's knife had drained the energy from the attack. The barrel of the grenade launcher still hit Gabe's shoulder hard enough to send a spike of pain all down his arm and across his collar, though.

Gabe twisted away, switched the knife into his left hand, and plunged it into the enemy's gut all the way to the hilt.

The man did not make a sound. He simply lurched away, so fast the handle of the knife slipped from Gabe's grasp. Gabe was too surprised to take advantage of the situation, and could only watch as his opponent moved two steps back and glanced down at the hilt protruding from his stomach.

Without so much as wincing, the man grabbed the blade and pulled it smoothly free. Blood trickled thickly from the wound, but it must have hit only muscle because no pain whatsoever showed on the UIR officer's face.

He flicked the blade once. Blood splattered into the dirt between them.

"You'll pay for that," he said, still grinning.

"We'll see—" Gabe started.

The man's wrist flicked again. Toward Gabe. The knife flew, spinning once in the air as it crossed the distance between them with incredible speed. Gabe had no time to duck away, or even to blink. He managed only to turn his head slightly, saving his eye. The blade bit deep, slicing through his cheek and scraping off the bone beneath.

Hot blood gushed across Gabe's face.

His opponent rushed in. Two long strides put him in striking distance again. Free of the knife, he'd flipped the Booshka around and now held it like a spear, the stock aimed at Gabe's face.

The butt of the weapon slammed into Gabe's throat, forcing him backward, and he almost tripped again. His hands went to his neck, trying to somehow stop the pain. His mouth opened and closed as he gulped for air like a fish out of water. His cheek throbbed from the knife wound.

Still smiling, his opponent jabbed again. The stomach this time. Gabe dropped to his knees, unable to stop himself. He doubled over, his body at once trying to pull in a breath and force out the air—as well as the contents of his stomach. The pain tore through him, and his body's battle to breathe made it a thousand times worse. The worst pain he'd ever experienced…

Until the enemy kicked him in the stomach.

The force of it filled Gabe's vision with stars and sent him tumbling onto his back. He lay in the dirt, staring up at the smoky sky. Coughed, and blood fountained out of him. It splashed down into his face, his eyes, so that he writhed from the sting of it. He would have wiped the blood away if his body would just fucking cooperate.

The bald man laughed. Slung his Booshka and picked up the pistol

Gabe had dropped. He turned it over in his hand, admiring it.

Then he kicked Gabe onto his side and placed one booted foot on the side of Gabe's head. Gradually he put his weight on that foot, pressing Gabe into the gritty soil.

"It's over," he said casually. "Imulsion or not, I've won."

Gabe could only lie there. The words almost didn't matter at this point. He was fading, and found it suddenly hard to care about this man, Imulsion, or the war. He cared only for his Gears, hiding on Gatka Ridge as hell rained down on them. The soil beneath Gabe shook over and over as the shelling pulverized the island.

And he cared about—

"Gabe?" a voice in his ear said.

Wyatt's voice.

Gabe lay there, too stunned to react. Wyatt? He must be imagining it.

"Gabe, come in."

His brother was still out there, somewhere. Far away, with any luck.

"Gabe, I'm aboard the enemy battleship. Found the fuel tanks, Gabe."

No…

"Remember Plan B, brother? You said I'd know what to do. I'm going to do it."

"No, Wyatt," Gabe muttered. The words came out as a groan. His tormentor laughed.

Of course, Gabe's transmitter was fried. He couldn't tell Wyatt to stop if he wanted to. But the part that hurt the most was the seed of hope that had formed in some wretched part of his mind. The part that still wanted to do his duty, to win.

"Wyatt, stop," Gabe muttered. "Leave."

"What's that?" the Gorasni asked, leaning over Gabe. "Famous last words?"

"Gabe," Wyatt said, and then coughed. He's wounded, Gabe realized. The voice was weak, and not from a poor connection. *"Gabe, I know you said I had nothing to prove to you. That I didn't owe you anything. You or Oscar. And you know what? That's what I love most about you two. You never, not once, made me feel as if I did."*

Gabe's eyes welled with tears. His opponent chuckled dryly at this, and pressed his foot down even harder.

If Gabe could have moved, he would have grabbed the man by the throat and strangled the life out of him. But he couldn't lift a finger. His body had shut down, the only movement it allowed were the convulsions of his stomach and the shuddering, pathetic gulps for air. His head felt like it was about to split like a melon.

"Goodbye, brother. Give my best to Oscar, will you? I hope this turns the tide."

And as was Wyatt's way, the explosion followed instantly. No waiting.

No hesitation. He just did the job, and moved on. Beyond the pale, this time.

The first boom was not unlike the firing of the deck guns. Except that it went on much longer. Even with one ear pressed into the dirt, and the other covered by the enemy's boot, Gabe still heard the *whoomp* as the fuel tank blew.

It was the second explosion, though, that caught the Gorasni's attention. Lying there, Gabe thought it might be even louder than the sound the mountain had made when it fell. The whole world around him bloomed white hot for an instant, and then faded. Despite being half a mile away and protected by the island, Gabe felt the heat of the blast all across his body.

The battleship's ammunition room must have gone up.

A series of tertiary blasts crashed across the landscape. This was something Gabe had expected—planned for, even. By sending in his Corvas, the enemy frigates would close ranks around their lead ship. When it exploded so catastrophically, the shockwave and barrage of shrapnel took these support vessels out, too.

Gabe knew it to be the case at once. His rival took only a second longer to understand what had just happened. And when he did, he staggered backward. Not much. Not even a step. But it was enough.

Despite the pain, despite the lack of breath, Gabe knew this was his chance. Likely the last he'd get. He had to find the strength to use it. He had to use the gift Wyatt had given him.

And that single thought of his brother's name created one final explosion. An explosion of rage and strength Gabe didn't know he had left.

With one sputtering cough he twisted. The weight on his head, lessened but still there, kept him pinned, but he could move his legs now. His left he brought up and coiled around the Gorasni's torso. His right he bent as far as he could, then kicked, hard. Not at the groin, but an even more painful target: the knife wound in the Gorasni's midsection.

A bellowing howl of agony rushed from the bastard's mouth as he fell backward.

Another figure emerged from the dust and smoke.

Sorotki. Gabe had never met the man, but he knew it to be him the instant he saw him. The cords of the pilot's parachute still dangled from his back, tangling around his legs. He shambled forward.

The pilot's face was a mess of scrapes, but there was a grim determination in his eyes. He went not for the enemy on the ground, but for Gabe, and for one brief second Gabe thought Sorotki meant to kill him out of sheer confusion.

Instead, Sorotki reached out, put his hands under Gabe's body, and lifted. One last burst of strength had Gabe back on shaky feet. One last effort, then Sorotki collapsed into the mud, passed out cold.

Gabe had time to think. He stumbled toward the enemy officer, who was

already on his knees and starting to scramble forward once more.

Gabe's foot kicked a lump of metal. A Snub pistol. He knelt, grasped the weapon, and lifted it just in time to press it against the forehead of the oncoming Gorasni.

Even as the man tackled him, the weapon discharged from the sheer force of the jarring impact. The last thing Gabe saw before he passed out was a spray of red mist mingling with the smoky air.

* * *

When he came to, Gabe's first thought was that he'd been captured.

Dirt and sand scraped beneath him as someone slowly dragged him by the neckline of his armor through the jungle. When he tilted his head he expected to see some Gorasni regular pulling him, but instead he saw Sorotki.

"Thought you'd left," Gabe mumbled. "Disobeyed or been shot down —"

The man glanced down. He slowed his pace and knelt. Gabe saw they were both in equally bad shape.

"Rough landing?" Gabe asked him.

Sorotki chuckled, dryly. Spat some blood into the dirt. His upper lip was badly swollen, a gash across it. "I almost did leave," he admitted. "What you asked… it was insane. It worked, though. You were right, Lieutenant Colonel."

"Yeah," Gabe nodded at him, "it was insane. But it was the only way."

"How'd you know the mountain would come down like that?"

Gabe would have shrugged if he could summon the energy. "A guess. My sniper, Davis, mentioned stress fractures in the rock. I guess everything has a weak spot."

The pilot offered him a grim smile of acknowledgement. Then he started pulling Gabe again, glancing off into the distance.

"They're landing reinforcements," he said, matter-of-factly.

"Already?" Gabe asked, shocked despite himself. "We need to regroup with the others. Find a place to hide out and defend ourselves." He pushed the pilot's hand away and rolled over. First coming to his knees, and then, after a few long seconds of dizziness, to his feet.

"Not them," Sorotki said. "*Our* reinforcements."

Gabe stared at him for a second, and then turned south. Sorotki had dragged him all the way to the low end of Gatka Ridge, where it sloped suddenly down to the water.

As Gabe watched, a small armada of COG vessels were pushing ashore to the exhausted shouts of gratefulness coming from the wounded and battered Gears waiting for them on the beach.

One Gear in particular, Corporal Blair, seemed to sense she was being

watched. She turned and looked up. Her face lit up with relief when she saw Gabe. The expression vanished when she realized the state he was in, though, and by the time Gabe's knees gave out and he collapsed once more, Blair was rushing toward him, shouting for a medic, with Gian at her side.

Blair reached him first. "We were just getting a team together to come back for you. Are you okay?"

Gabe reached for her shoulder, missed, and staggered. The world around him began to spin. "You know," he said to her, "these islands, they were supposed to be a reward posting."

And then he hit the sand, and darkness fell over him.

16: REFLECTION

Gabe stood at attention, ignoring the offered chair.

He felt… not better, not by a long shot. But Blair, Gian, and others had carried his unconscious body onto a boat and patched him up as they sailed for Vectes. Being dead to the world during that journey was probably the best thing that had happened to him in days, Gabe thought.

This debriefing was likely to be the worst. That is, aside from what had happened to Wyatt. Nothing would ever eclipse that.

Two sailors had met him when his boat arrived and marched him straight to the Captain's office. That he would be debriefed was a given. That it would happen so quickly wasn't exactly a surprise, either, but Gabe had hoped he might be afforded a visit with a medic, and perhaps a chance to grieve, first.

He was dead on his feet, both of which ached. Just like every other joint and limb. His cheek still burned from the knife wound, and felt stiff from the heavy bandage Gian had slapped over it on the boat. The cut would need stitches, of that he felt sure. But later.

Gabe wouldn't take the chair for the simple reason that Captain Phillips was not the only person waiting to hear his tale.

Colonel Hoffman was there, too. Not exactly a surprise, but not really Phillips's style, either. Gabe would have bet a round at the canteen that she'd want to hear this first, if only to have a chance to spin the story in a way that would put her in a favorable light as it went up the chain of command.

That, of course, would be impossible now, because of the third person in the room. *Which is probably exactly why Deputy Chairman Prescott is here*, Gabe thought.

The Deputy Chairman himself was not physically present, but

represented as a grainy image on a small comms monitor that had been placed in the center of Phillips's desk, facing Gabe. Phillips and Hoffman sat to either side of the screen, also facing him.

The arrangement made the whole thing feel like an interrogation.

They all waited as the politician attended to something just off screen. The thin man oozed an air of superiority that Gabe immediately detested.

Captain Phillips, elbows on the table, looked at Gabe with a cool glare that said, *"Don't fuck this up any more than you already have."* Hoffman took on a more casual posture, unintimidated by the presence of Richard Prescott, whom he no doubt spoke with often on all sorts of matters.

Waiting for Prescott to finish reading whatever it was he was reading, Gabe stared at the wall behind the trio, focusing on that same old crack in the plaster.

"Right," Prescott said, setting the document aside, off screen. "Let's get to it. Introductions are unnecessary, I assume, Lieutenant Colonel Diaz?"

"That's correct, Deputy Chairman."

"Good. Let's have it, then. In your own words. What the hell happened out there?"

With that the politician leaned in slightly, staring through the screen directly into Gabe's tired eyes. With his long, stern face and intense gaze, Prescott managed to be a forceful presence.

Gabe took a breath, finding the last dregs of his energy and patience. He kept his emotions in check and his eyes on the crack in the wall as he told the story, deciding to start from the beginning for Prescott's benefit, though he guessed the man already knew of the initial missions to the island from the way he constantly checked his watch.

The room became more tense when Gabe reached the part about Gatka Ridge, and all that had happened there. He spared no detail, no matter how gruesome. Hoffman lowered his head when Gabe told of the sacrifice Wyatt had made, but said nothing.

There was silence when Gabe finished. Captain Phillips stared studiously at the floor, leaving Gabe to dangle in the wind. Hoffman's face was impassive.

But Prescott was staring directly at Gabe now. The man's keen eyes bored directly into Gabe's soul, it seemed, and there was more than a little anger behind that look. It was, of course, the Imulsion that he really cared about.

Waiting for someone to speak, Gabe figured this would conclude one of two ways. They'd either pin the blame on him and throw him in the brig, or pin a medal on him for the victory. He had no idea which it would be.

It never occurred to him that there could be a third direction, and that it would change his life.

"Well," Hoffman said, breaking the silence. "I just want to start out by saying what you achieved out there at Knifespire is remarkable. No one…

no one… is arguing against that." This last he directed at Phillips more than Prescott, as if daring her to argue, but she remained impassive. Hoffman went on. "Not exactly how we hoped things would go, but sometimes we have to play the hand we're dealt."

For his part, Gabe couldn't quite decide if this was a compliment or not. But Hoffman seemed to want a response, so he gave him one. "Yes, sir."

"I'm sorry to hear about Wyatt. Your brother was a good man," Hoffman added, earnestly.

Gabe knew that was coming. Had promised himself, in fact, that he would say a proper "thank you" but otherwise keep his emotions in check. Telling the story of Wyatt's death brought up an unexpected avalanche of memories, though. Their childhood together. All the times he, Wyatt, and Oscar had gotten into some adventure, or out of the trouble that inevitably resulted. He saw Wyatt as that boy as much as the Gear who'd traded his life to save Gabe's, only to be—

Deputy Chairman Prescott's voice interrupted the thought.

"Brother?" the politician asked. "There's no mention of a relation in the man's file, or did I miss something, Hoffman?"

"He was my brother," Gabe said before Hoffman could reply. "I don't care what the file says. *He was my brother*."

Prescott raised an eyebrow. From his desk he picked up a folder—Wyatt's personnel file, Gabe assumed. Coolly, he said, "I just want to make sure I have a complete understanding, Lieutenant Colonel."

"Then you might want to look beyond what the file says, Deputy Chairman."

Unable to help himself, Gabe had loaded the reply with as much insolence as he could muster, but still Prescott's face remained unimpressed. He set the file back down.

"What really interests me right now, Diaz," Prescott said, "is Imulsion."

Gabe looked at his shoes, grinding his teeth. *Here it comes*, he thought.

"Who gave you the order to collapse that mountain?"

"No one," Gabe said, fiercely. "It was a tactical decision. We were going to lose that battle otherwise, and at least this way the Imulsion source is kept out of enemy hands."

"Oh, yes," Prescott said sarcastically. "A brilliant tactical move, as you're coming to be known for. But *strategically* you may have just cost us the war!"

The man slammed a fist on his desk to punctuate this point.

For a moment, no one spoke.

Gabe held the Deputy Chairman's gaze for as long as he could, then glanced at his Captain. She averted her eyes. So he looked to Hoffman. The Colonel at least had the decency to stare back. Empathetic at what Gabe was going through, perhaps, but not enough to stand up for him.

"Well," Prescott said finally, "what's done is done, I guess. We have to

move forward. Phillips? Hoffman? Impress upon the Lieutenant Colonel here that winning a battle means nothing if it doesn't serve the greater goal. Then get him back to Gatka Ridge. I don't like it, but he's the most qualified person to oversee the operation now. Give him whatever he needs. Troops to fend off an inevitable counterattack from the UIR, air and naval support as well. As much excavation equipment as you can find. I'll approve it, whatever the cost. We will have that Imulsion."

"That Imulsion," Gabe said, "is buried under a mountain. This is madness."

"I don't care what it's buried under, Diaz. We need it, and you're going to get it for us."

"The hell I am," Gabe shot back, before he could bottle the words up.

"We're done here," Prescott said. "Do your duty, Gear."

His image vanished from the small display screen.

Slowly, Phillips reached across the desk and switched the comm off.

A silence began to stretch, and in it Gabe felt a fresh wave of fatigue worm back into his mind. He needed sleep. He needed a proper medic. And he needed his brother back.

Mustering the last dregs of his civility, Gabe said, "Permission to be dismissed, Captain?"

"Denied," Phillips said. She was staring daggers at him. "I know you've been through hell, Diaz, but we've got a lot to discuss."

"Hell? What would you know about hell, sitting behind that desk, Captain?"

"You're out of line, Diaz!" She leaned forward, her fists pressing into the hard wood surface of the desk. "The Deputy Chairman himself just gave you an order, and if you know what's good for you, you'll follow it. Follow it right back to Knifespire, back to that pile of rubble you left behind."

"I left my *brother* behind, Captain."

"That's war, Diaz!" she roared. "We all lose people. Half my fucking sailors aren't coming home thanks to your little self-proclaimed victory out there."

"Exactly!" he shouted back. Then, quietly, "Exactly. They're gone because of my choices. My orders. Wyatt was only one of them, but he's going to be the last."

"What the hell does that mean?"

Gabe reached up and started to pull the rank insignia from his uniform. "Captain Phillips, I resign my commission—"

Phillips came to her feet in an instant, her face contorted in rage. She looked as if she were going to vault the table and physically stop him from what he was about to do.

"Now hold on," Hoffman said. He'd stood, too, and had a hand on the Captain's arm. "Would you mind if I had a word with the Lieutenant? Privately?"

Phillips ignored him. Her glare, fixed rigidly on Gabe's hand, did not falter.

"You're seriously going to resign over this?" she asked.

Hoffman wouldn't let Gabe answer. "Just… give us a minute, will you? I'll talk some sense into him."

"The hell you will," Gabe said.

After a moment's hesitation, Phillips stood and marched out. Hoffman waited for her footsteps to recede down the hall before he let out a breath.

Coming around the desk, he sat in one of the two chairs. And then he waited, saying nothing, until Gabe finally sat down beside him.

"Look," the Colonel said, leaning forward, "I know how much Wyatt meant to you."

"I really don't think you do."

Hoffman shook his head. "I do, actually. He talked about you all the time. You and Oscar both. The way he looked up to you… it spoke volumes about who you are, and how much you care."

Gabe said nothing. There was nothing to say. Not to this man. Not to Phillips. Not to the Deputy Chairman or, hell, even the Chairman of the goddamn Coalition of Ordered Governments. He wanted to be somewhere else. Anywhere else.

"Talk to me, Diaz. Forget about rank and all that shit for a minute. Just talk to me."

Without meaning to, Gabe let out a sigh of his own. A long one, and with it some of the anger drained from him. He couldn't look at the Colonel, so he looked at the crack in the wall again.

"I'm tired, sir. Tired of bureaucracy. The chain of command. But mostly, I'm tired of carrying this weight, you know? I make these decisions because they're the right thing to do, the move that brings us toward victory. But the cost, it's too much. It's… you know what, I don't need to say any of this. You've been around long enough. You know what I'm talking about." When Hoffman said nothing, Gabe decided *what the hell*, and kept talking. "Know what the difference between me and Wyatt is?"

Hoffman waited.

"The difference between him and me," Gabe said, "is Wyatt didn't need to understand. The justification, the consequences. He did the job, shook the dust off, and moved on. I can't do that. I used to think I could, but after what happened out there, to all those who won't be coming back, but mostly to Wyatt… I guess it taught me something about myself."

"What happened out there was remarkable, Gabe," Hoffman said. "I mean that. You have a brilliant mind for the battlefield. The loss of soldiers, it's rough, especially when one of them is close to you. Believe me, I know. But it's something every great leader faces and every great leader gets past, one way or another. You will, too."

Gabe thought it over. "I don't see how that can happen if I'm right back

out there, putting our troops in front of the enemy's guns."

"So you're going to resign? Throw away everything you've worked for?"

Gabe shrugged. "What other option is there? The reason I'm in these damned islands is as a reward for getting a bunch of Gears killed in—"

"The reward posting was for winning a fight no one thought could be won. Just like you did on Gatka Ridge."

"Prescott seems to disagree."

"He'll come around. Or, he won't. Hard to tell with that man. His brain doesn't work like the rest of ours, I've come to believe."

When Gabe made no reply, Hoffman went on.

"Look, if a change of scenery won't convince you, then what about the job? Let's find some other way for you to contribute."

"Something where I'm not ordering people to their deaths," Gabe said, bluntly. Hoffman nodded.

"If you want to put it that way, yeah. Just don't resign. We need people like you."

Gabe finally looked away. His eyes found the far wall, that same crack in the plaster again. It seemed as if it had shrunk in the last few minutes. Or maybe that was just the change in Gabe's perspective, now that he was sitting down.

He stood again.

"Thanks for the advice. I mean it."

Hoffman eyed him. "Sure. To be clear, though, you need to decide, otherwise Phillips is likely to throw you in the brig rather than let you walk out of here, and I can't stop that. So make your choice, Gabe. Go back to Gatka Ridge one more time, or request a change. Whatever change you need. I'll make sure it happens. Just… don't resign."

Gabriel Diaz looked at the man beside him, then back at the wall. Despite the resentment he felt, he could see there was wisdom in Hoffman's words.

"What's it going to be?" the Colonel asked.

"I…" Gabe finally replied. "I need to talk to someone else, first. Then I'll let you know."

* * *

"Wyatt's gone."

Saying the words finally made it real. Gabe, alone in his office, sat before the comms terminal with one hand over his wet eyes and the other gripping the microphone as if it were the head of a snake. He couldn't look at the screen.

Couldn't look at Oscar's face.

"Tell me what happened," Oscar said simply. Serious and to the point, as always. Gabe decided he didn't care what was classified and what wasn't.

He told his brother everything, but never once looked at him. If he did he knew he would lose what composure he had left.

The story took less time to tell than Gabe thought, and that made it worse. It was just a small chapter in Wyatt's life, in the end. The last chapter. At once fitting and somehow entirely unworthy of the young man. Finally, he ran the sleeve of his shirt across his eyes and glanced up.

And saw something he hadn't seen since they were teenagers.

Oscar Diaz had walked away from the terminal on his end, his back now to the camera. There was a locked cabinet on the far wall. Oscar calmly removed a key from his pocket, stared at it for a moment, then inserted it. From within he removed a bottle and a glass. He poured himself a drink. A shot of something dark and amber. He drank it down, and poured himself another. When he returned to the comm, he set the glass down in front of him and looked at Gabe.

"Well," he said, *"go on, get yourself one. I hate drinking alone."*

"Oscar… I'm not sure that's a good idea." His brother had sworn off booze years before, when he, Gabe, and Wyatt had all snuck up to the orphanage's attic with a stolen bottle. Gabe, after a few sips, had thought it nothing special. Pleasant, warm, and he liked the way it made the world a little fuzzy around the edges. Wyatt and Oscar, though, had turned their drinking into a competition. All at Wyatt's prodding, of course. Oscar had obliged, for the younger man had gone through yet another rough day, and deserved a little slack.

The transformation in young Oscar Diaz was remarkable, even considering their age and inexperience. Suddenly there was this jovial, lovable goofball. Suddenly, instead of an older brother, mentor, and would-be father figure, Wyatt had a best friend. The two were laughing uproariously when Gabe excused himself and climbed back down to their dorm. They kept laughing for hours, and perhaps more.

Gabe fell asleep listening to that laughter.

In the morning, Oscar had overslept, missed class, and spent the day shielding his eyes from any light brighter than a candle. He'd vowed to never pick up a bottle again, and to Gabe's amazement, he'd actually stuck to that.

Until now.

"You're thinking of that night, aren't you?" Oscar asked. Already his voice had transformed. There was a mirth to it, and a hint of something almost sinister. Gabe looked away, because of course Oscar was right.

"Well," his brother said, *" fuck it! That night was the last time I actually had fun, damn it. It was the last time I was a person Wyatt actually liked. From what I remember, anyway. What better way to honor him, eh?!" And he slammed back a second shot.*

Gabe could only shake his head. He wasn't sure what he'd expected from the conversation, but it certainly wasn't this.

"Who gave him the order, Gabe?!" Oscar suddenly shouted. *"Was it Hoffman? That son of a—"*

"I did," Gabe said. "I gave the order."

Oscar's face pinched. His cheeks were red with anger, and there was a sheen of sweat on his brow. If was as if Gabe were looking at a different person.

Gabe could have explained. Told him that Wyatt had practically volunteered, taken the task on so that Gabe could lead the main assault. But what was the point? Oscar was right. Gabe had given the order. He wanted Oscar to yell at him. To crystallize everything Gabe was feeling, and ram it into him like a sledgehammer to a brick wall.

Instead, Oscar took another drink. The glass was shaking in his hand now.

"I'd hoped we could arrange a funeral," Gabe said. "Take some time off. Mourn. Together."

"And is that what he would want?!" Oscar roared. *"No, brother, he'd want us to* avenge *him."*

"I already did—"

Oscar wasn't listening. *"No, he'd want you to avenge him, and as for me? He'd want me to be the brother he'd always wanted, and never was allowed. Poor bastard. Sorry about that, Wyatt. I failed you. We both failed you."* He was talking to the ceiling, and not making much sense. Breathing deep, he turned back to Gabe. *"We'll honor him in our own ways, Gabriel. I know what I need to do. You figure yourself out—but no funeral, okay? He would have hated that. Bury him quietly at sea if you have to."*

Gabe kept his mouth shut. Wyatt was already there, scattered across the Serano Ocean between two islands no one had ever heard of. All because Gabe had sent him there. All because Imulsion was worth more to Deputy Chairman Prescott than the lives of the Gears fighting for it. As if this were all some thrashball league.

Oscar was pouring himself a third drink. Or maybe it was the fourth.

"I'm signing off now, Oscar," Gabe said. He reached for the terminal. Oscar, his mood transforming with each drink, lifted his glass and winked at Gabe before the image vanished.

* * *

He sat in his office for a long time, staring at the blank screen, trying to decide what to do.

Bruised and exhausted, not to mention grieving his brother, Gabe had fallen into the mindset that his choices were black and white. Obey orders? Gabe knew in his heart that returning to Gatka Ridge was out of the question.

Which meant the real choice here, as presented by Hoffman, was to

resign, or reassign. Leave the COG and all its bullshit entirely, or continue to try and make this army into a force for good.

Both seemed right.

Both seemed wrong.

Gabe stood, and the chair creaked loudly, making that ugly popping sound. He turned to it, furious as always at the old thing, but instead of kicking it across the room as he had so many times before, this time he picked it up and lifted it over his head.

Two choices, Diaz.

Smash it on the floor as he should have months ago, or set it down and live with its uncomfortable cushion and old rusted bearings.

Smash it, that animalistic part of him screamed.

As Gabe began to swing it toward the floor, a third idea came to him, out of nowhere. At the last instant he flipped it over and set it there, upside down. The metal legs spun, squeaking. He left it like that, crossed the yard outside to the mechanics' shop, and without asking borrowed a toolbox.

For the next hour he sat on the floor of his office, surrounded by wheels and bearings and bolts, meticulously laid out around him. He cleaned each piece, oiled them, and reassembled it all. Then he cut a line across the back of the seat cushion and started to pull out all the old, crumbled foam padding. He stuffed it with the innards of four life preservers taken from one of the few remaining patrol boats. Let someone requisition replacements.

Not his problem.

When he had it all back together, the chair was better than perhaps it had ever been. Smooth, comfortable, functional.

Best of all, he'd spent an entire afternoon not thinking about the ramifications of his actions.

MEMORANDUM OF RECORD FOR LIEUTENANT 184729-H55R9-LM (DIAZ, GABRIEL)

SUBJECT: Revision of rank, transfer of assignment

1. PREVIOUS RANK AND ASSIGNMENT: Lieutenant Colonel, Vectes Naval Base, assigned to COG Army 7th Brigade and Vectes Joint Taskforce (Phillips, Janice, commanding)

2. NEW RANK AND ASSIGNMENT: Sergeant, Aldair Army Depot, assigned to 12th Mechanics Division, motor pool (Bowden, Samuel, commanding)

3. REASON: Self-demotion, personal

4. EFFECTIVE: Immediately

SIGNATORS:

Diaz, Gabriel
Phillips, Janice
Bowden, Samuel

ACT 3

THE GREAT SERAN REND

1: DAWN OF A NEW DAY

Kait closed the folder and laid it on the dash of the Minotaur, clicking off the flashlight.

The sky to the east had turned a dark pale shade of purple.

Dawn already? She rubbed her eyes. Took a swig of water from the canteen. Leaned her head back and closed her eyes.

Sleep wouldn't come. How could it? After all she'd just learned, there was no way her brain would let her have a moment of rest now. Which was good, she supposed. One less night without the dreams.

Her mind drifted back to her childhood again.

* * *

The bedroom was dark, heavy drapes pulled across the windows to block out the blinding summer sun.

A lone lantern sat on the floor beside his bed, dimmed to its lowest setting. It cast her father in shades of warm yellow and deep shadow. Shadows much deeper than they had been even a week ago,Kait realized. He hadn't eaten in all that time, save for a few gulps of broth that he mostly coughed up.

"It won't be long now."

That's what the village healer had said. That had been four days ago.

Looking at her father, Kait wished it had been quick. This was a new realization. A mature thought, she somehow knew. Not fit for a ten-year-old. She was supposed to want her father to somehow pull through, or to stay with them as long as possible, but she recognized the selfishness of that, and thought it was an awful state of mind.

All that mattered was Dad, and he was suffering. Everyone could see that. No one wanted to say it. They wanted him to fight.

Kait wanted him to find peace. To not have to live with this pain a moment longer.

Last night a terrible thought had entered her mind, yet she couldn't bring herself to hate her own brain for conjuring the image. Kait, leaning over her father, a hand clasped over his mouth and nose. She knew he would welcome it. Thank her, with his eyes if not words. He hadn't spoken in days, after all. Coughing—that ugly, wet, hacking cough—was all that was left for Dad.

"Mom," she said, very quietly, very carefully.

Gabe was asleep and didn't stir.

"Yes?" Reyna asked. She was holding her amulet, rubbing it with her thumbs, lost in old memories. They'd been sitting side by side for hours in silence, watching him. Watching him suffer, watching him die.

"What do they mean?" she asked. "His tattoos."

There were two, one on each shoulder blade. On the left, a skull, and words around it: "Gatka Ridge. Never Forget."

On the other, a soldier against an island sunset. "Wyatt" *written underneath, and a date.*

"He never really told me," Reyna said. "Something from his past. A time he doesn't care to talk about."

Minutes passed by. Too slow. Miserably slow.

"I… I hate seeing him like this," Kait said carefully.

"Me too, Kaitie. Me too."

Kait bit her lip, unsure if she should bring up the idea. The dream.She decided to try. For Dad.

"Last night I had this nightmare."

Reyna tensed, but made no reply. She waited instead.

Kait went on. "I… ended this. For him. I… like when a dog is old and sick, and… I…" She couldn't stop the tears.

Reyna seemed to relax. She put a hand on Kait's knee, and Kait grasped it with her own. Their fingers intertwined, white-knuckled.

"It's okay, hon," Reyna said. "It's a normal thought. A good one."

"*I mean…" Kait started again, trying to will the tears away and somewhat succeeding. "I mean, don't you think Dad would want that? This… this isn't him."*

"It's not that simple." Reyna squeezed her hand a bit harder.

"*Why* not?" *Kait asked, more urgently than she'd intended. It came out like a petulant child's question, and she regretted it instantly.*

Reyna shot her a glare, the kind that said Kait should be quiet and learn something. It was a glare Reyna often sent in her direction, but this time it softened, then vanished as quickly as it had appeared. Her mother sighed, then took Kait's hand in both of hers, lifted it to her lips, and kissed it.

"If it were me," Reyna said, "if it's ever me, Kait, don't wait like this. Okay? I don't want to suffer."

"Then why—"

"Because we're waiting for someone."

That caught Kait off guard.

"What?"

"We're waiting," Reyna said again, and a tinge of anger crept into her voice, " for your uncle."

"I… wait… uncle? What are you talking about?"

At that moment Gabe erupted into a racking cough. Flecks of blood and bile shot from his mouth and nose, spraying over the blanket that covered his impossibly thin frame. The coughing went on and on. Reyna and Kait tried to hold him down, powerless to do anything more than that.

Finally, after what seemed like an hour but was probably only a minute or two, the fit passed. He settled back into his feverish sleep. There was sweat on his brow. Without thinking, Reyna wiped it away with a damp cloth.

"Your father's brother," Reyna said after several minutes of silence. "Oscar is his name."

"Why haven't I ever met him before?"

"Because he's never been here before. Because he's a drunk. A stubborn asshole…" She took a deep breath. "Sorry. I can't stop myself sometimes."

"It's okay." Kait tried to process everything her mother was telling her. "If all that's true, why are we waiting for him?"

"Simple," Reyna replied. "Because your father asked."

* * *

And so they waited. Another day. Two.

But her father couldn't wait any longer than that.

They were sitting there, Kait and her mother, when his chest finally rose, then fell, then did not rise again. Despite all the sorrow and grief, Kait couldn't deny that part of her that was glad the suffering had ended. Finally. And she couldn't deny the anger she felt at this uncle she'd never met, because Gabe had gone through this for him, and the asshole still hadn't come.

She and Reyna were pulling the blanket over Gabe's face when the door opened, and a large figure in shadow stood in the entry.

Stood, then fell to his knees, and howled with grief.

* * *

Kait shuddered. She'd never really known or understood what had happened between them, but after what she'd just read, it wasn't too hard to draw conclusions. Whether either of them had known it or not, it was Wyatt that had been the glue holding the two brothers together, and when he died, both of them had changed.

When Oscar finally came to find Gabe, heeding the message Reyna had sent him months earlier, a message to which he'd never replied, he was too

late.

Kait realized, now, that Oscar had been in the process of turning his life around. As a result he'd missed that final chance to say goodbye, and speak with his brother one last time. It had driven him right back to the state he'd been in after Wyatt's death.

She thought of all the time she'd spent with Oscar over the years. He'd stayed, after that. Despite Reyna's constant anger, he'd stayed. Joined their village, cut his ties with the COG just as Gabe had done.

It took almost a year, but eventually he'd proven himself to Reyna. The two of them would become like brother and sister, but it didn't happen overnight. Far from it.

Oscar helped raise Kait, tried to be the father figure in place of his brother. It was something he was never really great at, and she'd always blamed the bottle that was never far from his reach.

She could forgive him of that, now, she thought. Decided she would tell him so, when they met again.

They *would* meet again, she decided.

Riftworm was on the list of Outsider villages Jinn wanted her to visit. Kait had tucked it at the end, because she'd known what Oscar's answer would be.

Or thought she'd known, at least.

But maybe, just maybe, with everything she'd just learned about Gabriel Diaz, she could find a way to let Oscar back in. If he wanted to, of course.

He probably wouldn't.

Stubborn old bastard.

Still, she decided she would try. She *had* to try, and it would be nice to see the twins again, too. Eli and Mackenzie. She'd heard they were flourishing there.

"You're not actually asleep, are you," Del said. Not a question. He'd switched places with Pasco sometime during the night. Kait didn't remember when.

She opened one eye and glanced at him. "How'd you know that?"

"If you were asleep, you'd be snoring, Kait."

"Bullshit!"

He spread his hands. "Sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but yeah… it's like someone's sawing logs. *Big* logs."

She kicked his shin, hard.

"Hey! Don't shoot the messenger!" Rubbing at his leg with one hand, he held out a ration for her. "Made you breakfast. I think it's supposed to be pancakes."

Kait looked at the mush in the flat package. At least it was hot. She wolfed it down.

Sitting beside her, eating the same gritty paste, Del pointed at the file on the dashboard with his fork. "What's that?"

"My dad's file," Kait said.

"No shit?"

"No shit."

"How'd you get it? Actually, never mind, I don't want to know." He could see the TOP SECRET stamp clearly, and knew what it might mean if he looked inside. But then he shifted, and a quizzical expression crossed his features. "I thought your dad was a mechanic? Why's his file so big? And why's it all, 'Top Secret'?"

"He *was* a mechanic," Kait said, "but before that he was a lieutenant colonel. A Gear. Some place called Vectes."

"Wait, I've heard of it. I thought that was a Navy base. What was he doing there?"

"Some kind of joint operation." She took the file and put it back into her rucksack. "Can we talk about something else?"

Del thought about it. "What do you think JD will have to say for himself when he recovers?"

"Errr… can we talk about my dad again?"

Del laughed. Paused. Then laughed again. "What, you think that's what JD will say?"

Despite herself she laughed with him, though there was little energy behind it. Quickly the cab of the Minotaur became silent again.

"I really don't understand what's gotten into him lately," Del said, "and I feel like every time I try to talk to his comatose face about it, Fahz is there. Or Jinn. Hell, sometimes both."

"Ugh, yeah. I know what you mean."

"I feel like… if I could just talk to him… *really* talk to him… he deserves a chance to explain." A wind picked up outside, peppering the side of the Minotaur with grit and dust. Kait shivered, despite herself. This was a bleak place to have to wait.

"We should go see Oscar soon," she said. "Riftworm."

"But I thought—"

"I know what I said before, but after reading that," she pointed at the file, "I just need to talk to him, face to face."

"It's not what you said before, Kait. It's Oscar. I didn't get the impression he wanted us going up there, unless we meant to stay."

"Yeah, well, that's his way of doing things. I think it's time I tried my dad's way, instead."

"Can we take Jack? Please?" He batted his eyelids, emphasizing the word.

"Ugh."

"Don't you miss the little guy?"

"Not really."

Lights appeared in the distance. They both tensed at the same time. She'd hoped for helicopters, but on the road ahead, trundling toward them,

were several Minotaurs. Beside them, striding confidently, was a Mega Mech.

"Here comes salvation," Del said, and he opened the door.

2: LONG ROAD HOME

The Mega Mech came to a knee and powered down. As the engines whined to a stop, and the hydraulics blasted out excess air, a hatch on its back opened and Augustus Cole poked his head out.

"I heard someone needed a rescue. That wouldn't be you two rookies, would it?"

Kait grinned despite herself, and motioned for him to come down. Marcus came around from the back of the vehicle, as did Salvador. To Kait's surprise, the old Outsider lit up at the sight of Cole and walked straight to him, thrusting out a hand.

"You're Augustus Cole!" he said, sounding awed. Cole was used to this, though, and he already had his personal charm turned on, taking the greeting in stride. They shook, talking thrashball for several minutes while Marcus and Del spoke with the drivers of the two new Minotaur arrivals.

Kait decided to leave Sal to his meet-and-greet, walking over to join the discussion of the matter at hand.

"—tow the other vehicle back," one of the driver's was saying. It was Lovings, she realized. Which meant he'd made it to New Ephyra, then immediately volunteered to come back.

The poor guy must be exhausted.

Marcus shook his head. "Leave 'em both here. They'll only slow us down."

"Orders were to bring them back," Lovings said apologetically.

"The one back there is immovable, Lovings," Kait said. "Every tire is flat. It'll be like dragging a ten-ton slab of rock."

"But the lead truck can still roll?" he asked.

Grudgingly, Kait nodded. Lovings gestured toward her, but looked at Del, as if to say Kait's words proved his point.

"Look, if one can't move, we leave it. I'm okay with that—but we have to try with the other. Orders are orders. We're already down to just a few vehicles back at the city. Even if they can't get it running, it can be stripped for parts."

"Fine," Del said, the fight gone out of him. "Then get everyone into one of your trucks, and send it on ahead. Kait and I can drive your other, towing the wreck."

"We should stick together," Marcus said.

"Thought you were just here as an observer?" Del said.

"I'm an observer when it gets me out of doing something I don't feel like doing."

Del could only laugh, despite himself.

Marcus went on. "We've got two working Minotaurs.Something happens to one of them, everyone will need to pile into the other. Can't do that if you two are trailing miles behind."

Del glanced at Kait, looking for support, but she had to disappoint him.

"Marcus is right. We should stick together." He stared at her for a second longer, then lifted his shoulders.

"Okay, you guys win. Let's move out. Cole, take point?"

"You got it, baby," Cole said, and he gave Pasco a fist-bump to conclude their little fan fest, before turning and climbing back into his giant mechanical suit. The Outsiders were split between the two functional trucks. Lovings had brought rations and water, which they divided among themselves.

The broken-down Minotaur was connected to one of the functioning ones via a length of heavy iron chain.

"Marcus and I will take the lead truck," Lovings suggested. "Can you and Kait handle the other?"

"Sounds good," Kait answered.

As Cole walked ahead of their caravan, his big mech suit shaking the ground with each step, Lovings and Del followed. The pace started out slow, and for a while things seemed to be working. Once they took their first corner, however, the towed vehicle went sliding into a rocky mound beside the road. The force of the impact sent it twisting and skidding back the other way, and Del had to slow to a careful stop.

They got out and checked the chain. It was still connected. Kait knelt beside it. The links were old and rusted in places.

"A few more twists like that and it'll snap."

"One of us needs to steer the broken Mino," Del said, "keep it on course."

"Yeah, agreed," Kait said. "I'll do it."

He nodded. Kait climbed into the damaged vehicle and settled into the driver's seat. It was unnerving without power. The whole cabin was dark, save for a small broken window in front of her where she could see nothing

but the back of Del's truck.

"Hang on a second," she said into her comm. The group waited while she took a screwdriver from the toolbox behind the seat, climbed out, and removed the armored panel that covered the windshield.

"You sure that's a good idea?" Del asked.

"I can't steer this thing if I can't even see which way you're turning, can I?"

"Guess not."

She threw the slab of steel onto the side of the road, tucked the screwdriver into a pocket, and returned to the seat.

"Can we go now?" Cole asked, but it was a rhetorical question. He was already moving.

They drove for an hour before the first hints of the Great Seran Rend became visible. Kait hadn't paid much attention to it on the drive to Pasco's Village. It had been foggy, for one thing, and she'd been engrossed in her own thoughts, waging a mental battle with the visions that had plagued her these last few weeks.

Now, the sight took her breath away.

Twenty miles wide and almost four hundred miles long, the Rend was a great crack in the world that had almost entirely filled in over the millennia. "Almost" being the key word. How deep the original crack was, or what could have caused it, she had no idea—and wasn't sure anyone else did, either. Over time, sediment from a saline lake—long ago dried and vanished—and dust had piled back in, slowly but surely hiding the Rend's true depth.

The result was hard to even recognize as a canyon. What remained was a cliff on each side, with miles of an almost perfectly flat mixture of salt and hard-pack soil that lay between. The cliffs themselves weren't like solid walls. Far from it. Thousands of ravines ran outward from the Rend's edges, like veins on a leaf.

Or, Kait thought, *like stitches on a scar.*

The comm crackled. *"Delta Squad, this is Baird."*

"Go ahead, Control," Del replied over his connection.

"No, it's Baird. Control is… never mind, you did that on purpose. Funny, by the way! So very, very funny."

"What is it, Baird?" Marcus said.

"Slight change of plans—and don't roll your eyes, I know you all are. Listen, we lost a Condor a few days back. Some kind of malfunction. It's possible—and I stress possible*—that the crash was due to Swarm interference. The crew all made it out safely, but the plane went down in the Rend."*

"What's this got to do with us?" Marcus asked.

"I've spotted the wreck—sorry, IRIS spotted the wreck… thanks for the correction, by the way, dear—IRIS spotted it via a targeting satellite, and the cockpit looks intact. I need you to recover the flight recorder. Might get some

valuable data on how this interference works."

"You said 'possible' interference. Going to detour us for 'possible'?"

"Well, if you want to get technical, it's one hundred percent possible."

Del let out a single, sardonic bark of a laugh. *"I think the word you're looking for is 'definitely.' Definitely caused by Swarm interference."*

"Semantics!"

"Not really!"

"Fine," Marcus said to cut them off. *"We'll check it out."*

"Thanks, team. Baird out."

Up ahead the road forked. The original path, which they'd taken to reach Pasco's Village, veered off to the left, going around the Rend. Another road went right, toward the nearest of the ravines that descended into the basin.

Cole went right. Lovings followed without question.

Kait tapped her comm. "How much time is this going to add to our return, Baird? We've got civilians with us, remember." Technically *she* was a civilian, too, but she decided not to go into that.

"Theoretically it's a shortcut," Baird answered.

"Theoretically?"

"Depends on the state of the basin. Varies between dry and flat—best road you've ever been on—to wet and muddy, like a foot-thick layer of pudding."

She considered that, and decided it was worth the gamble.

"What was the aircraft's cargo?"

"A squad of Tri-Shot DR-1s, plus support."

Combat-ready robots. Great. It took effort for Kait not to swear.

"Got a bad feeling about this," she said, more to herself, but the comm was still on.

"Orders are orders," Cole said. *"Let's get it done so we can go home. Besides, it's a shortcut, isn't it?"*

"Theoretically," Lovings repeated.

3: SHORTCUT

Kait renewed her grip on the steering wheel. "As if this wasn't hard enough already," she said to the empty cabin, and focused on the back of Del's Minotaur as they began the descent into the ravine.

Taking this road, into this specific ravine, soon made sense. It was a modest incline, and relatively straight. Kait had expected switchbacks and steep areas full of loose rock, but years of travel through this pass had compacted the ground.

In no time at all they exited the narrow canyon and drove out into the basin. Kait peered at the landscape. Behind them, stretching in each direction as far as she could see, was the wall pierced by thousands of perpendicular ravines like the one they'd just traversed. Viewed from here, it was like a jagged wall of teeth a hundred feet high, with most of the entrances camouflaged by the sheer scale of the whole thing.

The basin itself, though, was featureless and perfectly flat. The ground beneath her Minotaur's tires was of the hard-as-concrete variety, dry as bone.

"That's a relief," Cole said over the comm, testing the Mega Mech's footing. He stomped several times. *"Let's pick up the pace a bit, eh?"*

On this surface Kait didn't so much need to steer as correct. On such an even landscape they moved in a perfectly straight line. Only the subtle differences between the alignment on Del's suspension and her own would cause her to drift off course. The tiniest over-correction on his part, though, and she'd go wrong the opposite way. It was like she was the tail of a snake, slithering behind the determined head that forged her path. The one problem was the dust kicked up by the vehicles in front, magnified by the glare of the sun.

Her vision was near zero.

"Should be just ahead of you…" Baird said.

"Ah, there we go," Lovings replied. *"I see it."*

Kait couldn't see anything. The dust plume clouded everything, filling the cabin around her. Digging around, she found a pair of sunglasses in the storage bin between the seats, and an oil-stained shop towel which she wrapped around her nose and mouth. It smelled like an old engine doused with gasoline and mold, but it beat the chalk-like powder pouring into her cab.

Del started to slow down.

"What's going on?" Kait asked. "I can't see anything."

The dust cleared, and he let the view answer her question. The entire caravan had stopped, with Del pulling up between the other two Minotaurs, and Cole standing about twenty yards ahead. In the distance, about a quarter-mile away, was the crashed Condor.

She climbed out of the Minotaur to get a better view.

The aircraft lay on its side, one wing poking high into the air, the other looking to have been sheared off entirely. The impact had left a scorch-marked groove across the hard ground, and debris lay everywhere. The back half of the craft lay about a hundred feet behind the front half. The other wing lay near it, flat on the ground and facing the wrong direction. From the swirl patterns in the dust, it must have spun as it slid across the flat basin.

"Damn," Del said, as Kait walked up beside him.

"Good thing the crew got out."

"Yeah." He shifted, uneasy. "Sucks to be a DeeBee, though."

"Better them than us."

"For once I agree."

Kait glanced at him, surprised. Ever since Baird had given Del and JD the use of the support robot Dave, and later the upgraded version called Jack, his attitude had changed when it came to robotic help.

Marcus came up beside Kait, shielding his eyes against the oppressive glare thrown off by the white, baked ground.

"Looks like a monument to itself," he said. There was a hint of concern in his voice that she didn't like. He had terrific instincts, something she'd witnessed at Tollen Dam and then become reliant on during their night-long siege inside the caves of South Village.

"Cole?" Marcus called out.

The mech turned, responding to its pilot's every movement. An uncanny thing, Kait thought, given its size.

"Want me to take a look?" he replied.

"Unless you've got better things to do."

Cole saluted—via the mech—turned, and walked forward. He kept its massive chain gun ready, pointing at the ground in front of him. The weapon was a serious upgrade from the industrial staple gun the mech had originally carried, which hadn't been a weapon at all but a tool for

construction duties.

They all watched in silence as the huge walking vehicle made a wide circuit of the crash site. For a time he disappeared into the hazy distance, hidden partly by the dusty air and partly by the tail section of the plane. Then he emerged a few seconds later, still walking casually, and completed the loop.

"All quiet," he said.

"Any sign of the DeeBees?" she asked.

"Saw some of them in the wreck, still hanging from their hooks or folded up."

"Okay," Marcus said. "What now?"

Lovings stepped forward. "Baird wants the flight recorder. That's the 'bare minimum' according to him, but if any of the robots are intact, he'd like us to bring one of them back, too."

"An entire DeeBee?"

Lovings shrugged.

"Find out," Marcus said. "Hell, better yet, let me talk to the old fart." Without waiting for an answer he walked a short distance away, speaking into his comm.

"Baird, this is Fenix. Need some specifics…"

Kait tuned out the conversation. Her gaze was on the wreck, and a brief vision of a Scion standing in its midst, grinning at her. A wave of pain hit her at the same moment, causing her to double over, one hand at her temple, fingertips trying to push the agony back in.

"You okay?" Del asked.

The words took a moment to register. She couldn't answer until the pain receded.

"Yeah. Fine. I'm always fine, remember?"

"Funny, no, I don't remember. I worry about you, Kait."

"Save the worry for JD." She nudged him with her elbow. "Let's go take a closer look while Marcus sorts things out with Baird." Del gave a reluctant nod. He didn't seem entirely convinced by her assurances.

Sooner or later she'd have to tell him. She'd have to tell all of them. As she'd done for the last several weeks, though, she decided on "later," still holding onto the hope that these headaches, nightmares, and visions would go away.

"Cole, want to shadow us?" Del asked.

"Happy to!"

Pasco, who'd been standing by silently until that moment, stepped forward and cleared his throat. When Kait turned to him, she saw his villagers all watching the scene from the backs of the Minotaurs, their heads poking out around the edges of the canopy. There was real fear there.

"What can we do to help?" the village leader asked.

"Just stay put for the moment, Sal," Kait said. "We'll handle this."

"Me and my people don't like standing around," he replied. "Prefer to be useful."

Del shook his head. "The most useful thing you can do right now is be ready to leave the instant we say so. Keep everyone in the trucks. Okay? There's food—"

"We've eaten it all."

Del sighed. "Of course you have."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing," Del replied. "Forget it. I wouldn't have minded a bite to eat, too, but that's alright. Just… stay with the trucks. Please."

Pasco seemed to juggle several replies to this, physically biting each back before he finally dipped his chin in assent. He shot a frustrated glare at Kait before returning to his people.

Del waited until Pasco was most of the way back before turning toward the aircraft again.

"Ready?" he asked her.

She nodded.

The two of them marched forward, Lancers at the ready. Cole shadowed them, staying about fifty feet off to Kait's left. For all his charm and colorful character, the veteran soldier knew exactly where to be and what to do. As she watched him, he guided the Mega Mech in closer to the plane, keeping pace with Kait and Del as they approached. His gaze—along with the rotary barrel of his chain gun—swept the horizon as often as it looked in on their target.

All of a sudden, Del stopped. Kait took two more steps before she realized what he'd done, and halted her own progress.

"What is it?" she asked him, her eyes still forward on the ruins of the aircraft.

He hesitated. "Thought I saw something move in there. Did you see it?"

"No," Kait said, aware of how unsure she sounded. She *had* seen something, but it was one of her damned visions. "What was it? Swarm?"

"Never mind. Nothing. Just the heat playing tricks on me."

The last thing she needed in the midst of her own waking dreams was for someone else to start hallucinating. Kait renewed her grip on the Lancer and continued forward. Del did too, but notably still two steps behind her. About thirty feet from the wreck, Kait stopped and let her companion catch up. They stood there for a moment, just looking.

"What's the holdup?" Lovings asked over the comm.

In reply, Del lifted a hand and flipped him off.

The Corporal got the message.

A breeze started to kick up, stirring dust around them. It caused a thin moaning sound to drift out of the Condor's fuselage, too. Kait shivered, in spite of herself.

"Kinda wish we had Jack with us right now," Del said. "Or even Dave."

"Well, we don't. Let's just get this over with. Start with the flight recorder."

"Sure. Anything but going inside that." He nodded toward the dark, empty cavern that was the broken front half of the cargo cabin. It was almost entirely hidden in shadow. All Kait could make out was the vague shape of several DR-1 model DeeBees, still hanging from their ceiling hooks. So much inert metal, now—just how she liked them.

Del took the lead again, and she followed as he went to the cockpit. The nose of the aircraft lay in the dirt. Landing gear had failed to deploy, so the hull bore the brunt of the crash, burrowing into the hard earth as it skidded to a stop. It had come to rest at a forty-five-degree angle.

There was a hatch on the bottom where the seats would fall during an ejection, but this portion was buried a foot deep in the rock-hard ground. Half the windows were blocked by the ground as well, but on the other side, the side tilted up toward the sky, one of the windows had blown out during the crash. Reaching up high over his head with both hands, Del used the butt of his rifle to smash out the rest of the glass and make it more or less safe to enter.

"Give you a boost up?" he asked her.

"How about I give *you* a boost up?"

He grinned, sheepishly. "Alright, alright, I'll go. Hold my Lancer, and don't say 'famous last words.'"

"I won't." Though she'd been about to. Kait took the offered weapon and slung it over her left shoulder, then put her own over her right so she could stoop and lift him up to the window. Del put his foot into her cupped hands.

"On three?"

"Just go," Kait said, and she heaved.

Del yelped in surprise, but still managed to lever himself into the opening. She watched as he slithered into the cockpit, his feet last to disappear inside.

"What a mess," he called down, after a moment. "It'll take a minute just to get to the compartment, much less open it."

Kait took a few steps away from the wreck, watching Cole as he walked over to the tail section, knelt down, and peered inside.

Suddenly the Mega Mech lurched backward, Cole stumbling as he recoiled from whatever he'd seen within. The mech fell onto its butt with a loud thump. Kait moved a step in that direction.

"What is it?" she asked. "What'd you see?"

"Shit," Cole said. "Shit. Sorry. Got a little freaked out over here is all. There's a dead Leech inside. Damn."

A Leech. Kait glanced around at the sky. The damn things were never alone, always moving in a flock that resembled a flying school of fish. Slimy leech-shaped fish with lots of razor-sharp teeth. She shuddered,

remembering the first time she'd seen them, at Settlement 2.

"Sure it's dead?"

"I think so!" He found his footing and stood back up. Then he laughed. "In the moment I forgot I was in this walking tank. Hah! Feel like an idiot now."

"Yeah, well, you scared the hell out of me."

"Kait, don't tell anyone I fell, okay?"

"We all saw," Marcus replied on the comm.

Cole wisely ignored this. He leaned back into the broken section of aircraft, reached inside, and plucked the Leech out. Unlike the ones Kait had seen and fought, which were slimy and writhing monstrosities half as big as she was, this one was stiff and bone dry.

"Maybe we just need to starve the bastards," Cole was saying, "looks like they can't handle a dry heat!"

Suddenly she saw…

"Cole! Down!"

Kait took off, sprinting toward him.

The veteran didn't need to be told twice. He hit the dirt again, this time on purpose, as Kait lifted her Lancer and opened fire. Her bullets were aimed at a vague impression of a shape inside the darkness of the tail section. Something had moved in there, something small and shiny, and all she knew was it couldn't be anything good. Not after what Cole had just found.

His mech lay in the dust, its hands over its head, mimicking its controller's motions. When she stopped shooting he pushed himself up with one arm and twisted around to see what her target had been.

For a sickening second, Kait feared there'd be nothing there. That it would have been another trick of her imagination. Another nightmare somehow bleeding into reality. Then a small object rolled out of the tail section and lazily traced a circular path across the dusty floor of the basin.

It was a Tracker, Kait realized. One of DB Industries' nastier little creations, like rolling intelligent landmines, supporting their DeeBee squads. This one was still rolled into a ball, and from the way it moved she guessed it had little or no power. It rolled like a marble dropped from a table onto a hard floor. Just following the surface.

Cole watched it, frozen in his prone position, mesmerized by the object until it finally came to a stop.

"Jeez, Kait, scared the hell out of me! All for that little guy?" He laughed again. "Maybe keep your finger off the trigger, huh?" He started to maneuver the Mega Mech back to a standing position. The Tracker was maybe ten feet away.

Something about it was wrong, though. Kait squinted against the glare. Its surface, usually a metallic blue, was mottled, with great patches of greenish-gray. She opened her mouth to ask about the coloration when the

little robot suddenly popped open. This time there was no chance to shout an alarm.

It exploded.

She'd been near Trackers when they went off before. Dove out of the way of their insidious explosive behavior. As bombs went, they were about as dangerous as a frag grenade. Lethal, but not impossible to avoid. Thanks to their size you could shoot them on approach, and because of the delay after they popped open, hitting the deck was a passable last resort.

This one, though, had no such delay.

It popped open and went off, all in one fluid sequence. If Cole hadn't been in that mech suit, he would have been torn to shreds.

Yet this wasn't the usual explosion, either. As Cole instinctively turned away from the blast, Kait saw the side of his Mega Mech. It was covered in green goop—and that goop was on fire. The greenish-blue flames licked and sputtered against the mech's armor. Huge drops of it fell to the ground and started to steam against the dirt.

"Shit!" Cole shouted, staggering backward, trying to wipe the stuff off with his suit's right hand, but all he succeeded in doing was smearing it onto the mech's palm. When the hand came away, it too was on fire. Cole waved it, causing the flames to grow.

"Get out of the suit!" Kait shouted, running again, but Cole wasn't listening. He tried to wipe the hand on his mech's leg, set it on fire, then finally seemed to understand the nature of the slimy stuff.

More of which now rained down all around the area, creating dozens of little fires in a circle around the source of the blast.

"What the hell's going on out there?" Del said on the comm.

"Just get the transponder and get out of there, we need to leave!" Kait continued toward Cole, trying to think how she could climb the back of the mech, rip open the pilot's harness, and haul him out of there. Suddenly Marcus was beside her, running as well. Lovings was right behind him.

"Cole!" Marcus shouted, forgoing the comm. "Drop and roll!" His voice had a quality to it that seemed to cut through everything, Kait thought, and it was just what Augustus needed right now.

The words got through. Cole lurched and threw the mech back to the dirt, laid it out, then started to tumble over and over across the now-steaming landscape. The effort didn't douse the flames on his suit, but did smear the foul-smelling slime across the ground. Eventually there was so little left on his armor that the flames just petered out.

Cole piloted the suit into a shaky upright position, where he paused to check his arms and legs.

"Is it out?"

"Looks like it," Marcus said. They were twenty feet away from him now. Little green fires still dotted the landscape all around them. "What the hell is that stuff?"

"It reeks," Lovings said, covering his nose with one arm.

"Burns a hell of a long time, too." Marcus crouched near a patch, watching it. "Swarm corruption?" he guessed. They'd all seen it happen to DeeBees, turning them into what Del had dubbed "Rejects," but this was the first time Kait had ever heard of a Tracker being corrupted. She kicked some dirt onto the little patch of flame, smothering it.

"Must have mixed with the explosives packed inside," she said. "Converted it into this… stuff."

"Good thing there was only one."

It was Lovings who said it.

Kait knew she would never forgive him.

Six more Trackers suddenly rolled from the back section of the plane.

"Get back!" Marcus shouted.

They all fired at once, walking backward.

The corruption that had transformed the Trackers' explosives had also ruined their logic circuits too, though. Kait watched as they rolled away from the ruined fuselage and took random, curving paths outward from the plane. Two even bumped into each other, detonating prematurely and sending flames raining in all directions.

Picking the others off from a safe distance took only a few seconds. She shot two with her Lancer, while Marcus and Lovings handled the rest.

"Did you have to?" Marcus asked the young Gear.

"How was I supposed to know?"

A shadow crossed over the barren landscape. Kait glanced up.

"Get back to the trucks," she said. "NOW!"

4: NOTHING MORE THAN A BLUR

The flock spiraled and twisted, all bunched up together like a school of fish. It was a larger group than those she'd seen at Settlement 2. A hundred Leeches or more, all moving as a single organism. They moved so fast and turned so quickly it was impossible to tell which route they'd take. All she knew was they would come, and anyone they passed over would be torn to shreds.

Any human, that was.

She glanced at the rows of DeeBees hanging from their racks in the two halves of the broken Condor.

"Marcus, the DeeBees!" She ran toward the front half of the plane, pointing toward the rear. Marcus took off toward it.

Lovings raced away, back to his Minotaur, and fired up the engine. As Kait ran she heard the chain gun on Cole's mech start to spin up, and made a mental note to thank Baird later for upgrading the big machine.

Leeches began to fall from the sky as Cole swung his weapon about, but getting a solid bead on a flock was hard enough with a Lancer. Trying to get the Mega Mech to adjust its aim quickly was tough even for someone as skilled and as strong as Cole.

"Sit still, ya little bastards!" he shouted.

Kait pushed herself to a sprint, ignoring the Leeches. As she neared the fuselage, Del poked his head out of the window and held up the transponder.

"Finally worked it loose," he said, smiling. Then he saw the way Kait was running, and looked around.

"Get back inside!" she shouted, just before she heard the creatures darting toward her. Throwing herself into the remains of the cargo bay, she didn't dare to waste time looking back. Judging from the sound of it, they

were right behind her and closing fast. She slid across the floor on her belly, the feet of hanging DeeBees jostling her back as she passed. They clanged together like a macabre windchime, then settled.

Kait hit the far wall, turned over, and lifted her rifle.

A silence lasted the blink of an eye.

Then the cabin was full of them. Dozens of screeching, thrashing Leeches filling the air around her. Kait did the only thing she could do, and opened fire. Her Lancer tore into the tightly packed group. One Leech after another exploded in a spray of gore.

There were way too many, though. They would soon fill the air around her and rip her to pieces. She kept firing.

The gun clicked empty.

Her eyes closed.

Silence fell. Kait opened one eye, and saw that the creatures had ignored her. A few lay dead around her. Most had left, but the rest, a dozen or so, were attached to the hanging DeeBees, and their mechanical bodies were starting to twitch.

"Del," she said into her comm. "Get the hell out. Now."

"Don't have to tell me twice!"

"That is the second time I've told you."

"Okay, true, but you said to get back in!"

Keeping her back to the wall, her gaze fixed on the DeeBees, Kait slowly exited the cargo bay. Most would simply be ruined by the Leeches, but there was a chance a few would survive the… coupling… and emerge as Rejects. Corrupted by the Swarm, somehow, like the Trackers outside.

Once the sunlight hit her shoulders, Kait turned and ran. Del was right beside her, and they raced for the Minotaur. Marcus was nowhere to be seen. Cole still fired wildly at the sky, burning through ammo at a ferocious rate. Meanwhile, Lovings hit the accelerator and raced straight toward Kait and Del, swerving at the last second to go around them.

"What the hell, man?" Del had to dive out of the way.

Helping him up, Kait turned to see Lovings drive straight into a flock which had been seconds from tearing into her and Del. There was a sound like hailstones pelting a tin roof as he powered the Minotaur through the writhing pack. Some of the creatures flowed around the truck, but many slammed into its front grille and armored windows. None seemed to make it inside.

The Outsiders in back had closed the canvas covering.

"Get to the other Minotaur," Kait told Del. "Secure that flight recorder and tell the Outsiders to close the canvas."

"What are you going to do?"

"Find Marcus."

She and Del looked at one another, and he nodded, understanding that she meant Marcus or Marcus's remains—whatever happened to be out

there.

"Good luck," he said.

"You too."

Del twisted away and raced for the truck. She started to turn toward Marcus's last position when she saw the Minotaur Del was running toward make a sudden lurch forward. Pasco was in the driver's seat, staring through the tiny slit that served as a front window. Several of the other Outsiders were crammed in there with him.

All she could see were his eyes, but that was enough. She nodded at him, and he began to drive.

"Get in!" she heard from far behind her. Pasco's voice was barely audible over the revving engine, and Del's reply was lost in the chaos, but an instant later she heard the door slam shut.

Kait started toward the plane, and when the sound of the Minotaur's engine grew loud she turned and leapt up onto the running board, grabbing the side-view mirror for support. Making herself small, she crouched behind the flared wheel well and held her Lancer in her left hand. Three Rejects emerged from the front half of the plane, staggering toward the back half which lay a hundred feet beyond.

"Marcus must be in there!" she shouted to Pasco.

At her voice, and the roar of the approaching truck, the Rejects turned. Pasco plowed right through their ranks, but they were spread out too far. One took the full brunt of the truck's force, slamming right into the center of the grille. The other two whizzed past. Kait took a few potshots at one, who passed only a few feet from her, but it was impossible to aim or even know if she'd hit anything.

The Reject was nothing more than a blur.

She twisted, facing forward. In the distance, Lovings made a wide arc in his truck, the flock chasing him to no avail—for now. Cole's Mega Mech was standing out there, too, still pouring rounds into their midst. He'd whittle them down eventually, unless he ran out of ammo first.

With the corrupted DeeBees behind them, Pasco made for the back half of the airplane.

"Jump!" he shouted as they neared it. "I'll circle around!"

Kait jumped, hit the dirt, and rolled, then came to a stop on one knee, Lancer ready. There was no time to waste, so she rushed forward at a full sprint into the darkness of the tail section.

Her eyes took a moment to adjust.

Marcus was there, pinned against a wall by a Reject who had him by the neck. It squeezed, and Marcus—who had both hands wrapped around the DeeBee's—strained with all of his formidable strength to keep his windpipe from being crushed.

Kait did not hesitate. She walked up to the Reject, put a foot square in the middle of its back, gripped its control unit with two hands, and ripped it

out. Instantly the corrupted robot's hydraulics turned off. Its hands let go of Marcus, arms falling to its sides, completely slack.

Still she kicked its legs out from under it. The DeeBee fell to the floor with a *clang*, the lights in its eyes still fading. Bringing the control unit down like a rock, she crushed the head of the mechanical monstrosity. Then she started to throw the control unit aside, but Marcus was suddenly there, a hand firmly around her forearm.

"Keep it," he said, his voice more gruff than usual.

"Why?"

"Baird can study it. Like the flight recorder. We need to figure out how to prevent this before it gets worse."

"How could it get worse?"

Marcus fixed her with a knowing glare.

"Forget I asked," Kait said.

"Thanks, by the way." He let go of her arm.

"Thank me later—we're not out of this yet."

He shouldered past her, back out into the sun, ready to fight whatever was still standing. As Kait emerged behind him, however, she saw the battle was over. The last of the flock had perished under the relentless onslaught of Cole's chain gun. Pasco's truck was a few hundred feet away. It turned back to face them, engine still running. She couldn't quite make out his eyes through the narrow window slit, but somehow knew he was there, staring at her, ready to run down any more enemies that might emerge.

Del stood on the running board of the Minotaur's cab, one hand up to shield his eyes from the glare.

"We good?" he shouted.

Kait waved him up, then gave the same gesture to Lovings. As the trucks arrived Cole walked over, knelt, and hopped down from the Mega Mech's controls. The chain gun in the big machine's hands slowly spun down, smoke trailing from its barrels.

"Damn!" the veteran said, dusting himself off. "I don't mind fighting Swarm, but our own machines? That's absolute bullshit if you ask me."

"Yeah. They fight so *good* now, too," Del said. "Almost unbeatable, really. Tough, agile…"

Cole shook his head. They all knew that Del had served as a training template for the robot's combat AI.

"Naw, I'd say they're more like erratic. Unpredictable. Nuts."

Del seemed about to argue when the comm crackled.

"Hold that thought," he said, and talked into his comm. "Go ahead, control."

"What's your status?"

On a whim, Kait motioned Pasco over to listen in. After the assist he'd just given her, it seemed only fair. Outsider lives were on the line here too, after all.

"We found the flight recorder," Del said, "and some more corrupted DeeBees."

"That ain't good," Baird replied. *"Can you bring me one of their control units?"*

Kait glanced at Marcus. "Way ahead of you," she said. "Also, there were Trackers here that also seemed to be… err… infected."

"Trackers, huh? Oooookay. Their control unit is tough to get at in the field. If you can find one relatively intact, just bring the whole thing back here."

Del pulled a face. "Just to be clear, you want me to grab an unexploded intelligent landmine that's under the control of an unknown substance that corrupts its behavior, and put it on the seat next to me? How's that a good idea?"

"Fair point," Baird conceded. *"Let Cole carry it. He's good at that sort of thing. Might even hold a world record or two."*

"Ah, not this shit again!" Cole replied. "You win six thrashball championships and suddenly it's all anyone knows you for."

"You've got reinforcements on the way," Baird said, ignoring him. *"They should be waiting for you once you leave the Rend, and there will be another Mega Mech with them who can assist."*

Cole nodded. "Alright. Hope they brought some extra ammo, I'm all out."

"You had a thousand rounds!"

"Yeah, well, there was at least that many of those Leech motherfuckers."

Even through the comm, Kait thought she could see Baird's eyes roll.

"Just… get back here in one piece, okay? All of you? Jinn will have my head if we lose anyone on this little side-errand."

"Wait," Del said, "Jinn doesn't know about this?"

"Of course not! Who do you think you're talking to?"

Hearing that, Kait shot a glance at Marcus, then Del. The last time Baird had sent them on an "errand" it had nearly gotten JD killed. Though, she amended, that was largely due to JD's own decisions.

"We will," Del said. "Walker out." He looked at the group. "Saddle up. We're barely halfway home."

5: TRICK OF THE LIGHT

The floor of the Rend proved hard-packed and bone dry for the next several miles, and blessedly free of any more Swarm. Through the dust, Kait thought she could see the cliff wall that marked the end of the basin, but it was hard to tell for sure.

"How much farther?"

"A mile," Del replied. *"Maybe less."*

"Once we get past this," Lovings said on the comm, *"it's not far to Jacinto Plateau and then a straight shot to New Ephyra. With any luck we'll be there by dinner."*

Kait knew enough to know you couldn't make a "straight shot" through the fractured lands of the Jacinto Plateau, but she also knew that wasn't really what Lovings meant. They were almost to cover, which was the important part. Out here, on the salt flats, they could be seen for miles. The plume of dust trailing behind them might even be visible from orbit.

Ahead she saw Cole stop and turn around. He took up a defensive stance.

"Something wrong up there, Cole?" she asked.

"Negative! Just thought I'd watch your backs while you exit this lovely place."

And there it was. As Kait's truck was pulled up to the Mega Mech, she could see that Cole had positioned himself beside a ravine about fifty feet across. It zigzagged its way up from the salt flats. Unlike the "road" they'd used to enter the Rend, this was very narrow—barely wide enough for a Minotaur—and made of soft sand and large rocks. The walls were sheer and ominous.

"Suddenly I'm not thrilled with this idea," Del said.

Kait agreed.

"We're here, we've got Cole in a fifty-foot-tall suit of armor, let's just get it done," Marcus said.

They started the climb.

Then Kait saw the real reason for Cole wanting to bring up the rear. As soon as they took the first sharp corner of the ravine, her unpowered vehicle completely ignored her turn of the wheel. The tires just slid in the soft pack of sand and rubble.

Cole came up behind her truck and nudged it, pointing it in the right direction again. Then Del eased forward and started to pull again. They went on like this, corner after corner, at what felt like an average of maybe five miles per hour.

"This is going to take all day," Kait said.

"It was quicker coming down," Lovings agreed.

"Plus you aren't towing anything," Del said.

For once Lovings was smart, and kept his mouth shut.

The trucks inched along the ravine. It was nearly midday, and despite the steepness of the walls on either side of their route, sunlight baked the ground and turned the Minotaurs' cabins into ovens. Only Kait was comfortable, having ditched her armor-plated windshield.

A shadow fell over her, but when she glanced up there was only the glare. The edges of the ravine were barely visible against the sun's brightness. She shielded her eyes, but could see nothing.

"Anyone else see that?" she asked on the comm.

"See what?" Del asked.

Kait wasn't sure what to say. Her visions had fooled her so many times recently that she hesitated to voice such things. Of course, that's what just about got her—and everyone with her—killed, keeping such a vision to herself.

"I thought maybe something flew over us. After that flock I'm a little on edge."

"Trick of the light, maybe?" Lovings asked.

"I can barely see anything," Del replied. *"Cole, what about you?"*

"I'm just focused on Kait's rear," he responded. *"Uh. That didn't come out right. I'm looking at her behind. The truck. I'm focused on the rear of the truck."*

Lovings barked a laugh, but when no one else joined in he quickly got himself under control. Kait shook her head, smiling a little despite herself. It amused her whenever Cole's superstar confidence faltered, and the humble man shone through.

"Baird, you send any aircraft with the reinforcements?" Kait asked on the comm. No reply came. Only static. "Must be the ravine walls," she said hopefully. "Blocking the signal. If that was the reinforcements, they won't be able to home in on us."

"Good point," Cole said.

"Can you climb up there and have a look? Just in case?"

"Sure thing," he replied, probably eager to do something other than babysit the damaged Minotaur.

Twisting around in her seat and looking out the window, Kait watched him guide the Mega Mech up the ravine wall, coping with the soft rock, scaling it as expertly as if he were on a mountaineering expedition. He had to leap to reach the last handhold, then pulled himself up and over the edge. Hidden by the rock, and with the sun overhead, he was impossible to see.

"Don't… any… here." His words were garbled.

While Kait was trying in vain to spot him, she didn't notice her Minotaur twisting to one side. In front of her, Del swerved to avoid a jagged rock in the "road." There was a horrible, teeth-juddering sound as the outcropping scraped along the underside of her truck. Kait grasped the steering wheel and heaved it, trying to straighten out, but it was a move of pure instinct—totally ineffective in the vehicle's current state.

She ground to a stop. The chain connecting her to Del started to pull taut, and then her whole cabin shuddered as his truck came to a stop too, unable to pull her any farther.

"Woah," Del said, *"hold up everyone. Got a problem back here."* Kait got out and climbed down, her foot sinking into the soft-pack ravine floor as if it were loose snow. On hands and knees she studied the vehicle's underside.

"It's punctured the undercarriage and into the drive shaft," she said to Del, hearing his footsteps as he approached. "Going to need to lift it off."

"Cole, you read me?" Del said. "Need a hand down here. A mech's hand, I mean."

No reply.

Del swore. "Damn rocks."

Kait stood and looked at him. She was about to suggest they take a break, when the shadow fell across the ravine once more. Only this time, it didn't go away.

Then Del crashed into her, tackling her to the ground.

The whole ravine seemed to shake as something massive slammed into the broken Minotaur, crushing it. Kait felt the shockwave of the impact even as she and Del landed in the rubble a few feet away. Bits of metal and rock sprayed over them, but Del took the brunt of it.

Kait clambered to her feet as quickly as she could. Rocks continued to fall, a cloud of dust obscured her world, but there were hints in that cloud of Cole's mech suit, and something large grappling with it.

"Juvies!" Lovings shouted on the comm.

No way that thing on top of Cole is a Juvie, Kait thought. She went for her Lancer, only to realize she'd left it in the cab of the Minotaur, which was now crushed flat under the Mega Mech. She had her sidearm, though, and it would have to do. It was a Talon Autopistol, after all. A marked improvement over the MX8 she'd first learned to fire when Reyna thought

she was old enough.

Del was up, smartly with his Lancer. He glanced at her, saw her weapon, frowned, but said nothing. Visibility was down to ten feet or so, and shrinking fast. Bursts of gunfire rang out from somewhere at the front of the caravan, echoing off the ravine walls. She heard the gasps and alarmed shouts of several Outsiders, as well as Pasco's stern orders.

"Out, out! Get to the edges! Hide!"

Stones rained down, jostled loose when Cole fell into their midst. Kait pressed herself against the rock wall, pulling Del toward her just as a boulder the size of a fabricator landed where he'd been standing.

"We gotta get to my Minotaur," he said to her, then coughed as the dust became so thick they could taste it. "Got to get the hell out of here." She nodded and took the lead, running along the edge of the ravine, keeping as close to the wall as she could.

Something swung at her from the dusty air. A massive blue metal object. She ducked under it, rolled, came up running. It was the leg of Cole's mech, she realized.

"It's gonna be like that, huh bitch?!" Cole shouted somewhere off to her right. "Two can play at that game!" She heard what sounded like a giant fist slamming into an equally giant wall of metal.

Del flinched at the sound. "What the hell's he fighting?!"

"I don't know—"

A foot slammed down beside her. Kait was thrown against the wall, bounced off, landed on the huge armored boot, jumped as it lifted off the ground, and dove through the air a good eight feet before she tucked into a somersault and came up running again.

She glanced behind her in time to see Del slide beneath the foot. He made it through an instant before the massive appendage slammed back into the rubble with an earth-shattering *thud*.

The other foot stomped down nearby. Cole, digging in. Then a third foot, just beyond it, and a fourth.

6: FEEL FOR A PULSE

Kait turned, running hard. The Minotaur had to be somewhere close. She found a small crevice in the wall and ducked into it, taking a second to catch her breath. Del almost ran past her. She grabbed his arm and pulled him back.

"Where's the truck?" she shouted in his ear.

"No fucking idea!" he shouted back. "Should have been right here!"

She peered into the dust and smoke. Pasco was twenty feet away, tucked into a crevice, and she could see the faces of Outsiders behind him. Her eyes met his and she saw only concern and determination in them. As she started to look away, another detail caught her eye.

There was a gun in Pasco's hands. A Tri-Shot. The other Outsiders behind him carried Enforcers.

"Oh, Pasco, you magnificent bastard," she said.

"What?" Del asked.

Kait pointed. Pasco still looked at her, and Kait realized it wasn't determination in his eyes, but a need for something. They'd taken these weapons from the Minotaur—likely broken into a locker in the back—and they intended to join the fight. But he was asking her. Or daring her to defy him and toe the COG line.

"Where'd they get those?" Del asked.

"No idea," Kait replied, "but it's our last chance at reinforcements, and I say we take it."

"Under the circumstances, I agree."

Kait held Salvador's gaze, nodded once, and saw him return the nod. He turned away then, and started giving orders to his people. In that instant something massive whooshed through the cloud of dust, and in the process it cleared the air for a moment.

Kait caught a glimpse of Augustus Cole in his Mega Mech suit, holding Del's Minotaur by its nose and swinging it like a club at the second Mega Mech. The gigantic robot suit took the blow square in its face, and flew back into the ravine wall opposite Kait. Cole drove in hard with a knee into the thing's midsection. It doubled over, bits of metal and sparks flying out in all directions where the two collided.

As it fell, Kait caught a glimpse of its back. She had to blink to make sure she wasn't seeing things—but no, it was real, and she finally understood.

"Del, look! The pilot of the other mech!"

"A goddamn Reject? Are you fucking kidding me!?"

DeeBees had piloted the mech suits back when their purpose was purely for constructing settlements. To see a Reject inside one… Kait couldn't begin to imagine how that had happened, or how the thing would behave.

It was tough, that was for sure—and smarter than the other Rejects she'd seen. Somehow it found its footing and cold-clocked Cole's mech with a mighty blow, right to the side of the head. Cole lost his balance, fell sideways, further pulverizing the already smashed Minotaur that Kait had been steering moments earlier.

Had it fallen the other way, it would have probably demolished the other vehicle, leaving them entirely stranded.

"Enough of this shit!" Cole shouted, loudly enough for them to hear even without comms. "I've got better things to do than deal with your ass!" He righted himself, grabbed the other mech by its legs, yanked it off its feet. He twisted, and the mech's hydraulics strained as Cole heaved the bulky mass back down the ravine.

"Get moving, people!" he shouted. "I'll hold it off!"

"We can't leave you alone with that thing!" Kait replied.

"What the hell are you going to do to it?"

"The man has a point," Del replied. "Marcus! Regrouping at the forward truck!"

"Copy that," the veteran replied. *"Kait, I'm near the Outsiders. They seem to have armed themselves."*

"They'll help," Kait said in a tone that cut off any argument. "Join up with them, get them to Lovings' Minotaur. We'll meet you there."

"Let's move!" Del shouted, already running.

There was a hellish screech from above. A Flock, swooping down with fantastic speed. She knocked Del to the ground just before they hit.

Shit, this is all we need…

Across the Ravine, Marcus and the Outsiders opened fire on the group of Leeches. It was quite a sight, she thought, seeing Marcus with his Lancer and Pasco right beside him, balancing the Tri-Shot against his hip, the two of them pouring hundreds of rounds into the writhing mass.

The creatures roiled, trying to find a way out of the line of fire. Their

dead fell. Five, ten, then more. Splatting against the ground like so much discarded meat. Pasco shouted an Outsider war cry as he pushed the Tri-Shot right up to its overheating point and beyond. Smoke streamed off its spinning barrels.

Marcus finally elbowed him and got him to ease off.

Pasco listened, nodded, let go of the trigger. His people were still firing into the flock. Controlled bursts, and they fanned out to give each other clear lines.

In that instant, Kait saw the future.

One future, anyway. Outsiders and COG, side by side, fighting the Swarm. It was how it should be. Getting them to the safety of New Ephyra might be a first step, but it didn't have to be the last. She needed to convince First Minister Jinn of that. Tell her what happened out here.

Del tugged at her sleeve. Kait broke from her train of thought and ran beside him, motioning for Marcus and the Outsiders to do the same as the flock finally darted off toward safer ground, most likely wanting to build speed for another pass. Everyone piled into the one remaining Minotaur.

The Outsiders crammed in back. Kait, Del, and Marcus all stood on the running boards, Lancers at the ready. Lovings remained at the wheel. Once Kait pounded on the door he floored it.

The tires spun in the gravel, found purchase, and they roared ahead.

In the back, Pasco continued to fire on the flock, using his Tri-Shot with a bit more finesse now. Easing off each time it started to smoke.

A work in progress, she mused.

Behind them, Cole stood in the middle of the ravine, facing away from them. Beyond him Kait could see the lumbering Reject-driven Mega Mech working its way back up. Its limbs twitched, its head and torso bending and snapping as if the parts weren't put on properly. The freakish, inhuman way it moved made her skin crawl.

Cole waited, letting it come. He hopped back and forth like a boxer waiting for his exhausted opponent. Then the dust kicked up from the Minotaur's tires started to obscure them.

"Slow down," Kait shouted. "We'll lose him." She bellowed out the back, "Cole! We've got to go!"

"I'll catch up!" he hollered back. "Got some unfinished business."

"If that flock hits him…" Marcus said.

Kait nodded, but what could they do?

The answer came a second later.

The ravine's path had straightened out, giving Lovings a chance to build up some speed. Only, he wasn't.

"There's another Minotaur ahead!" Lovings shouted. Twisting forward, Kait saw it, too. The truck was parked at an angle, blocking one side of the pass. It appeared to have skidded sideways and hit the ravine wall, partially collapsing its tail section. DeeBees lay on the ground around it, Leeches

attached to their backs, shoulders, or legs.

"I guess that's our reinforcements," Del growled. "Jinn couldn't spare any Gears."

Lovings swerved to avoid the vehicle, slowing slightly in the process. Kait leapt from the running board and landed in a crouch next to the truck.

"What are you doing?" Del shouted.

"Helping Cole," she replied. "Keep going!"

"Hell no—we stick together!"

He hopped down too, as did Marcus. The pair of them flanked her, covering her as Kait raced to the door of the Minotaur and yanked it open.

"Fahz," she breathed.

The Gear lay slumped over the steering wheel. Blood ran down his face from a broken nose. His eyes were shut, and he wasn't moving.

"Kait?" Del called. "Whatever you're going to do, do it fast please!" He and Marcus started shooting. At what she had no idea. She was distantly aware of the receding sound of Lovings' Minotaur as it raced away, and the rattling gunfire of the Outsiders in the back, punctuated by occasional salvos from Pasco and his Tri-Shot.

She felt Fahz's neck. Found a pulse.

A strong one. She shook him.

"Fahz," she urged. "Get up. We've got to move." He stirred. His eyes fluttered. Then in the blink of an eye he rocked back hard into the seat and swung his right hand up. His sidearm, an MX8, was pressed to Kait's neck.

"It's me," she said, "it's Kait."

"We're here to rescue you," he said blearily, the gun still under her chin.

"Yeah. Thanks. Thought we'd return the favor."

The man shook his head, and when he opened his eyes again they were a little clearer. He moved the gun away, glanced around, then fixed his gaze on her.

"We need to go," Kait said. "Now."

"Right. Right. Okay."

She helped him down to the dirt. He was unsteady on his feet, but seemed to gain more of his senses with each second. Blood still trickled from his nose.

"The Mega Mech," he said, gesturing in a random direction. "I think it __"

"We know," Del said. "Cole's handling it. Or, trying to."

"And we should be helping him," Marcus added.

"Okay, I'm with you," Fahz replied. "Just point me at them." Then he walked off, in the wrong direction.

For fuck's sake… Kait was about to say something snarky, but then he turned at the back of the Minotaur and started to root around in the cargo area. When he emerged, he was holding a Salvo rocket launcher with both hands. The huge weapon, meant for a DR-1 combat DeeBee to carry, was a

handful, but Fahz hefted it with ease.

"Like I said, point me at them."

"Uh. Right back there." Del stepped aside.

Kait had a different idea. She quickly hopped back into the cab of the truck and tried the engine. It fired up on the first try.

"Get on!" she said, throwing it into gear.

They did so.

She stomped on the accelerator and pointed the truck straight toward the confusing cloud of dust and mech limbs back down the ravine.

"Be ready to jump," she told her passengers.

"Jump?" Del asked. "We just got on."

"Yes, jump! On my mark. Except you, Fahz!"

"Why the fuck not?"

"You want revenge on that Reject Mech? You'll have it. Aim that Salvo straight up and be ready to shoot."

"Shoot at what?"

"You'll see."

She eased off the accelerator.

The timing had to be perfect.

As they neared the two Mechs it became clear that Cole was losing, and the reason seemed to be the total unpredictability of the way his opponent moved. Piloted by a corrupted DeeBee, the other Mech was erratic, throwing wild savage punches, kicking and scrapping like a feral child with a thirst for blood. It was all Cole could do to fend the savagery off, much less do any damage.

Kait wondered if his plan was to tire the thing out. A fine plan if that had been an actual person in there. Watching from a distance, though, Kait could see what he couldn't. Something about the DeeBee's original code was showing through its mangled brains. The tendency to put its feet in a certain position before it delivered an attack, as if bracing itself against the kickback from a gun it didn't hold.

"Oh shit," Fahz said. He was next to her, in the passenger seat but with the door open.

"You see what I see?" she asked him.

"Yeah, I do."

"Then you know what to do."

"Hell yeah." He'd done this before. Weeks earlier he'd sparred with a DeeBee configured to simulate a boxing opponent. JD had beaten it because, as JD put it, the DeeBee wasn't programmed to win—only give him a good match. And this one, despite all its insane randomness, seemed to be doing the same.

It was the stance that gave it away. Bracing itself for a return punch, allowing its opponent a chance.

Kait aimed the Minotaur and floored it. Ahead, the mech was setting its

feet to deliver another wild punch. Cole was rocked back against the ravine wall, and even without the comm Kait thought she could hear his grunt of pain. The Mech took the blow, but Cole was inside it, and it was shaking him worse than any tackle he'd ever suffered.

Kait drove right through the Reject's legs.

Fahz leaned out.

Aimed upward.

Waited just long enough…

Then he fired.

The Salvo rocket launcher unleashed four projectiles in rapid succession. Kait couldn't see if they hit, but Fahz's whoop of victory told the story. He'd done it.

Skidding hard to the left, she slid in the gravel, almost throwing her companion from the vehicle in the process. As they ground to a stop, she looked left in time to see the wounded Mega Mech stagger. Fahz had scored a direct hit on the one place the thing was vulnerable—the pilot's harness, halfway up the back. It was a ruin, now. Billowing flame and shooting gouts of sparks into the air.

Then the whole machine started to topple over backward.

Fahz grabbed her by the collar and yanked her from the vehicle. She fell out the passenger door and into the dirt next to him. Together they scrambled for cover as the huge machine fell onto their Minotaur.

When the dust settled, there was only the wreck of the machine, and Augustus Cole standing over it, triumphant.

"That's what you get for takin' on the Cole Train, bitch!" He whooped at the sky. It was a sight to behold, seeing a Mega Mech pound its own chest in a victory celebration.

"Should we tell him?" Fahz asked, coughing.

"Nah," Kait replied. "Let him have this one." She extended a hand and helped the Gear to his feet. There was a moment, then, where she felt some respect for the man.

Then she remembered his attitude toward the civilians he and JD had fired on at Settlement 2, and the way he'd driven a wedge between him and his friends afterward.

Kait let go of his arm and walked away, before the camaraderie went too far, or in the wrong direction.

7: THE C.I.B.

Kait woke the next morning to warm sunlight on her face, birds chirping outside her window, and the smell of coffee and fresh bread drifting in from Sam and Damon's kitchen.

She stretched, and for several long moments she simply lay there and watched reflections from Baird's garden fountain play lazily off the gilded inlays around the coffered ceiling. It was a full minute before she realized that it was the first night in… she couldn't remember how long, that she'd slept peacefully.

After a shower and another marvelous breakfast with her hosts, Kait offered once again to somehow repay them for letting her stay there, and was refused once again without any hesitation.

"Well," she said, "thank you, both. I better get going. Debriefing is in an hour."

To her surprise, Sam stopped her. "There's something I think you should do first."

"Oh?"

The woman glanced at Baird, who nodded approvingly.

Sam returned her focus back to Kait, and sighed.

"It's JD. He's awake."

Kait blinked.

"When… no one told me…"

"Late last night," Baird said quickly. "After you'd gone to sleep. I, uh… I pulled in a favor from the Doc, and no one else knows about it yet. Thought you might want to talk to him before Jinn finds out."

"Or Fahz," Sam added with a slight shudder.

Somewhat dazed by the news, Kait thanked them again and returned to her room. She put on her COG armor, tied her braid, slipped her mother's

amulet around her neck, and set off for the hospital.

* * *

She'd expected to find him much as she'd left him. Prone on the bed, tubes sticking out of him, machines beeping and whirring as they kept him alive.

To her surprise, though, the bed was empty. Not only that, the machines had been removed. For one awful second she thought Baird had it wrong. That they'd just moved JD, or worse, that the end to his coma was because he'd lost his battle, not woken from it.

"Hey, Kait."

He was seated by the window, one leg up on a footstool. The bandages on his right arm were gone, but in their place was a stim sleeve—the latest medical tech, and still considered experimental as far as Kait knew. Jinn really was sparing no expense.

Kait swallowed. Awake and upright, the change in his appearance was no longer something that could be sympathetically ignored.

"You look like hell," she said truthfully.

"Nice to see you, too," he replied. Perfunctorily he added a smile, then coughed weakly before casting a glance toward the other chair. "Sit?"

"I don't really have time."

"Oh," he said, surprised. "Busy day?"

Kait didn't take the offered chair, but she did cross the room to stand over him. There was an accusation in his tone that brought the anger part of her roiling emotions forward. He must have seen it in her face, too, because he looked away before she could speak. Almost absentmindedly he tapped the control on his stim sleeve, closing his eyes as it pulsated briefly. Pain relieved, JD's features relaxed again. He opened his eyes, but kept his gaze on the far wall.

"Go ahead. Say your piece," JD muttered. "I deserve it."

"Funny, I sort of thought you'd be the one who did the talking."

"Happy to, but you've got a busy day, so…"

Kait shook her head. "How dare you make me feel like the asshole in this situation, JD." Angrily she swept a tear from her cheek, hating that it was even there in the first place. "I wanted to see that you were okay. Awake. Alive."

Some part of the man she knew was still in there, it seemed, because he smartly said nothing and simply waited.

"As for explanations, or whatever else you might wish to say, I think I'm not ready to hear it yet. And from your attitude, you're not ready to say it."

A part of her hoped, then, that he would talk. Maybe that he'd even beg for her understanding, if not forgiveness. But still he remained silent. At least he finally looked at her. Held her gaze. At least he gave her that.

"I'm going to be gone for a while," she said.

"Kait—"

"We can talk when I get back. Maybe by then your conscience will have recovered as well as the rest of you."

She didn't wait for a reply. Kait Diaz turned on her heel, and strode from the room. She waited until she was in the elevator before allowing another tear to fall.

* * *

Salvador Pasco met her at the entrance to Government House, embracing her warmly before they went inside and were shown, immediately, to Mina Jinn's office. He was cleaner than she'd ever seen him. If she hadn't known who it was, she never would have recognized Pasco.

To her surprise, Jinn wasn't the only person there. As she and Sal entered, the First Minister was just stepping in from the balcony. Behind her were Marcus Fenix… and Colonel Hoffman.

"Thank you both for coming," Jinn said to them. "I'll consider your ideas and have an answer for you this evening." Marcus nodded, then noticed Kait and Salvador. He came over, Hoffman wheeling up beside him and looking, to Kait's eye, somewhat haggard.

"Everything okay?" she asked.

Marcus inclined his head slightly.

"Is it ever, around here?"

"I guess not." She leaned into him, and lowered her voice. "JD's awake. I just came from the hospital."

Marcus narrowed his gaze, but said nothing.

Kait added, "I would have told you sooner, but Jinn… I thought you might want to know before she did, so you could talk to him alone."

"How is he?"

"Alert, I guess. Enough to talk," she admitted. "They put a stim sleeve on his arm. Seems to be helping."

"Thanks, Kait." Marcus glanced at Jinn, who had crossed to the opposite side of the huge office and was pouring some tea.

"I told her what happened out there," Marcus said. This was directed to Salvador, Kait realized, and not her. "I'm not entirely sure if she's pleased or angry."

Pasco raised his shoulders indifferently. "If she's upset, we'll go home. Simple as that. We're not the ones who wanted to be here."

Kait put a hand on his arm. "Let's just talk to her before we start saying things that might get us off on the wrong foot."

He eyed her. "Careful there, Diaz, you're sounding more like your father than Reyna might have liked."

Marcus gave them one last respectful glance, then left. Hoffman started to wheel himself toward the doors, too, but hesitated.

"It's a nice day out," he said to Marcus, "think I'll go for a stroll in the park. Meet you later?"

"Sure."

Hoffman did not look in Kait's direction as he finally departed the room. The double doors clicked softly shut behind him.

The room became quiet, save the clink of Jinn stirring tea.

"Is there any news on James Fenix?" the First Minister asked finally. Kait arched an eyebrow. *So, she hasn't heard yet. Thank you, Baird.* Kait gestured toward the door.

"You didn't ask his dad?"

"I fear he is getting tired of that question," Jinn replied, tapping a spoon against one of the mugs with finality. She picked up the tray and brought it to her desk, setting it carefully in the middle. Then she walked across the room to her guests and extended a hand to Sal.

"First Minister Mina Jinn," she said, smiling warmly.

"Salvador Pasco," the Outsider said, his usual cantankerous persona mollified. For a moment, anyway.

"May I call you Salvador?" Jinn asked. "Or, perhaps, Sal?"

He cleared his throat. "Only Reyna called me Sal. A privilege I've decided Kait can inherit. Everyone else calls me Pasco."

"Fair enough."

"Now, what do I call you? First Minister? That's more formal than I usually like to be."

Jinn tilted her head. "I believe Augustus Cole sometimes refers to me as 'the CIB', but other than that, First Minister is it I'm afraid."

"CIB?"

"Cast-Iron Bitch."

Sal gave a deep, hearty laugh. "Something tells me you and I just might get along."

Kait could only sit there, honored by inheriting the use of "Sal," yes, but mostly she was stunned at the exchange. Mina Jinn, absolutely in her element, and strangely matched by Sal's clever tongue and general unwillingness to back down. It was, Kait thought, a bit like watching a duel and a dance simultaneously.

"I understand Corporal—pardon, Ms.—Diaz provided your group with weapons during that final battle?"

Kait leaned in. "Given the circumstances, I felt it best to—"

"Nah," Sal said over her. "One of mine picked the lock on the weapons chest and we helped ourselves."

Jinn, to her credit, took the information in stride. "I'm told we'd have suffered a lot more casualties had you not… assisted, in your fashion."

He shrugged. "Survival's all we were thinking about."

"And survival is why we brought you here."

"You brought us here to protect us," Sal shot back. "That's different."

"How so?"

"We prefer to protect ourselves, and do our part. Didn't come here to stroll in the parks or lounge by the pools. If that's what you have in mind for us, tell me now, CIB, and we'll kindly be on our way."

There was a part of Kait that wanted to kick the man under the table, and another equal part that wanted to hug him.

"I'm sure we can find something for you and your villagers to do here."

"Something meaningful," Sal said.

"Of course."

"Kait will be our official liaison," he continued. "Or sponsor. Whatever you want to call it. We answer to her, work through her, only."

Still feeling as if she were watching two martial artists spar, Kait said nothing.

"Well," Jinn replied after a moment's thought, "I can't order Kait to take that responsibility, I can only ask her."

They both looked at her, each expecting the same answer. She surprised both of them.

"Actually, I thought maybe someone else could handle that duty."

"Do you have somewhere else to be, Kait?" Jinn asked. A loaded question if there ever was one. Kait nodded.

"I do, actually."

Mina Jinn eyed her, the disappointment on her face unmasked.

"Who did you have in mind, then? First Lieutenant Chutani?"

"Fahz? Oh, God no," Kait replied. "We want to keep them here, not drive them away." She meant it, but kept her tone lighthearted. The brief glare Jinn sent in her direction implied the First Minister didn't appreciate the comment.

"Lovings would be a fine choice," Kait added.

"Or Cole," Sal offered. "My people would listen to him. Hell, anyone would! The man's a legend. Still prefer you, though, Kait. Can't imagine what might take you away from here, after all you just went through to bring us in."

"Well, that's just it," Kait said. "There's one more village left to visit."

For once Jinn was at a loss for words.

"Riftworm?" Sal asked. "Good luck with that, Kait. I hear your uncle's got quite a thing going up there. It's not just a bunch of huts with a wall around them anymore. That's a proper village. They've got a tavern and everything."

"We've already sent two expeditions," Jinn said, "and both were driven off. Violently."

"Yep." Sal laughed. "That sounds like Oscar Diaz."

Kait thought about her father, and all she'd learned about him in the last few days. What he'd fought for on Knifespire, and what he'd lost there, all for nothing. She was going to lose her uncle, too, she thought, if he stayed in

that bleak place.

"Well," Sal said, "if anyone can get through to him, it's you, Kait. I can go with you if you think it'll help."

"No," Kait said. "Thanks, Sal, but… no. This is something I need to do. Del will come with me."

Jinn steepled her fingers, resting her chin on her fingertips, and stared at the mugs of tea on the desk in front of her. They had gone cold. She was on the verge of voicing her thoughts, but Kait had made her decision.

"I know what you're going to say, First Minister. That it sends the wrong message if I go to them yet remain a holdout myself. So, if the offer still stands, I accept. I'll join the COG. Whatever it takes to get my uncle and the rest of the Outsiders to come here before the Swarm reaches them."

Jinn did not move, except her eyes. They locked with Kait's, and remained there for a long, meaningful moment.

"You're sure about this?" she asked.

Kait sat back, folded her arms across her chest, and nodded. In doing so she felt two things press against her heart. Reyna's amulet, and Gabe's memorandum, tightly folded. Both were hidden under her armor.

Both equally part of her, now.

8: NO WALK IN THE PARK

He was exactly where she'd seen him the last time they'd met.

Kait took her same seat on the bench, feeling more than a little bit like a spy as she pulled the file from her satchel and handed it across to Colonel Hoffman.

"Thank you," Kait said.

"Interesting reading, I hope?"

"Very much so."

Hoffman lifted the blanket that covered his legs and lap, and slipped the file beneath. For a time he sat there, silently. Long enough that Kait wasn't sure if their meeting was over. Then he jerked his chin toward the north. The towers and rooftops of New Ephyra, the wall, the ruins of the old city, and the mountains beyond: all lay in that direction.

"How was it, out there?" he asked.

Kait winced. "Bad. They get closer all the time."

"But your mission, it was a success?"

She shrugged. "We brought some Outsiders back with us, which was the goal."

"I'd say I'm surprised they agreed to it, but then I guess that's why Jinn sent you."

Something about his words triggered a thought she hadn't had before. A realization, or maybe a parallel. The way her father had stopped Wyatt from meting out a Gear's justice in that fishing village, allowing the locals to handle their problems themselves. And, in contrast, what JD had done at Settlement 2. Firing first. She wondered, suddenly, if this perspective hadn't been Hoffman's reason for giving her the file all along.

She looked at him.

He shifted, uncomfortable in his chair and, she thought, under her gaze.

"About my father," Kait said after a time. "There's still something I don't understand."

"And what would that be?"

Kait hesitated.

"He demoted himself to the motor pool, rather than leave the COG."

"That's right."

"And yet, when I knew him, he had definitely left the COG. Not only that, he became an Outsider, even helping found the village with Reyna."

"Also correct."

Kait waited, hoping for more, but Hoffman said nothing. He was waiting for her to put the pieces together.

"This isn't the whole file," she said, and saw at once from his expression that she was right. Hoffman's eyes narrowed, still fixed on the mountains in the far distance.

"There are things to which even I don't have access." That caught her off guard. Kait swallowed.

She wasn't sure if she believed him, though.

"Which isn't to say I don't know things," he added. "But, I have my limits, Diaz. Lines even I won't cross. Secrets that… need to die, quite frankly."

Kait snorted. "If you think that's going to put a lid on my curiosity—"

"On the contrary… but… look, Diaz… Kait, I've done what I can. I thought it was important for you to have some perspective on the man your father was, back then." He paused, finally looking at her. "My advice to you is to move forward, but keep your eyes open. Your mind open. There's more to learn, but I'm not the right person to learn it from."

"Who is, then? Oscar?"

"Maybe."

"Maybe? If not him, then who?"

"I was going to say Richard Prescott."

"Prescott?" Kait stammered, surprised. "I thought he died."

"He did. Years ago. Doesn't mean you can't learn things from him. Just like you learned from your father through that file."

"If you're going to hand me Prescott's file…"

"I wish," Hoffman said, chuckling. "If you can get your hands on it, though, I'd love to have a look."

"So, what then? How do I learn about Prescott?"

What Hoffman did next filled Kait with a sudden unease, as much as any she'd felt in recent memory. The former head of Special Forces, a man with a career that crossed paths with every major COG operation ever undertaken, glanced around to make sure no one was listening.

"Just keep your eyes open and your ears piqued, Kait. Listen, watch, learn."

"For what, though?"

He looked at her. “There’s a name, and I’m guessing someday you’ll come across it. So pay attention when you do.”

“What name?”

“Ukkon.”

Kait committed the name to memory. In fact, she thought she’d heard it before, when she was a child, but the memory was elusive. Perhaps deliberately sealed away.

She shivered.

“Is this goodbye, then?” she asked.

“Oh, doesn’t have to be. I’ll be around, but busy.”

“Busy with what?” she asked. Then quickly added, “If you don’t mind me asking.”

“A little project of mine,” he said. “To be honest, all this business between us has put me in a contemplative mood. Been thinking about the old days a lot, recently.”

He glanced at her, and a sly smile crossed his face.

“It just may be that your dad’s inspired the both of us.”

“Oh?” Kait replied. Then, as she thought about his words more, she added, “Wait, are you saying you’re going to come out of retirement?”

“Not exactly,” he said. “But getting that file for you made me realize I can still contribute. And I don’t mean snooping around the records room. I mean something bigger, like in the old days.”

“That sounds a little ominous, coming from you.”

His smile widened, and he nodded. “Good. It should. With any luck, the Swarm won’t know what hit them.”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jason M. Hough is the bestselling author of nine novels, including *The Darwin Elevator*, *Zero World*, and *Mass Effect Andromeda: Nexus Uprising*, as well as numerous short stories including *Star Wars: Turning Point*.

When not writing he can usually be found either playing with his kids, trying to fix his eternally broken 3D printer, or exploring alien worlds in virtual reality.

He lives near Seattle, Washington.